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Beyond This is a Nothing: Beckett's Early Fiction

A Thesis

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I. Once More into the Breach

The mistake, the weakness at any rate, is perhaps to want to know what one is talking about. In defining literature to one's satisfaction, even brief, where is the gain, even brief? Armor, all that stuff, for a loathsome combat. – Samuel Beckett, Letter to Georges Duthuit, 1948

Considering Beckett's low opinion of criticism, it is not only ironic that so much critical literature has been produced on Beckett's plays and fiction, but also inevitable that the majority of that criticism is almost useless in offering readers a useful lens through which to view Beckett's work. If the typical critical impulses are to complicate, to reveal hidden connections, to make parallels between a work and its context, historical or philosophical, and to ultimately comprehend literature by bestowing upon it a dominant meaning or theme, then Beckett renders such tactics useless in advance, like a general who knows the other army's moves before it makes them. The problem is not that Beckett's texts lack meaning, but rather that they are supersaturated with meaning, containing parallels to so many different critical and philosophical traditions that whenever a critic highlights a single example of one of those parallels and then claims it as Beckett's true stance, the key to unlocking it all, they only end up demonstrating their susceptibility to confirmation bias, selecting the parts of the text that best suit their argument while ignoring the rest, unable to cast off their “loathsome armor.”

To avoid ascribing to Beckett any endorsement of that which he represents, my focus will be primarily on the form of Beckett's first five novels, *Murphy* (written mid-1930s), *Watt* (written early-1940s), *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* (written late-1940s), because form is more value-neutral than content, not a position but rather the shape a position takes. One can argue forever about whether or not Beckett is an existentialist, post-structuralist, etc., but it is much more difficult to misinterpret whether a book has chapters or not, for example. To begin with, then, my questions will be of the following type: Why is *Murphy* 13 chapters? Why is *Watt* four sections and an appendix? Why is

Molloy in two parts but *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* both consist of a single unbroken section?

How does language gain meaning in these novels? Does that mechanism change at any point? Are any of the novels linked by a linear process, meaning that they need to be read in a specific order? If so, which novels, and what is that process?

Before moving on to those questions, I'd like to first use Hugh Kenner as an example of how traditional critical practices fail in reference to Beckett. In 1958, Kenner went to France to interview Samuel Beckett about Beckett's work, a rare opportunity given Beckett's famous reticence. As Kenner describes it in the introduction to his *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, Kenner went into the interview with a grand conception of Beckett's novels as containing "some hidden plan or key like the parallels in *Ulysses*," (1) but Beckett quickly dismissed this approach, suggesting that "overinterpretation" was more of a danger than misinterpretation, and that such a notion of literature falsely assumes that authors are writing "in order to affirm some general truth" (3). hilariously, despite this rebuke, the reader finds Kenner proposing late in the first chapter that Beckett's *Three Novels* re-enact "a sardonic counterpoint to the epic tradition," (63) with *Molloy* as first Molloy's *Odyssey*, complete with Lousse as Calypso and a policeman as Polyphemus, then Moran as *The Aeneid*, *Malone Dies* as a recapitulation of Dante's *Commedia*, and with *The Unnamable* moving from the classic tradition to the beginning of the modern by carrying "the Cartesian process backwards, beginning with a bodily *je suis* and ending with a bare *cogito*" (128).

While thankfully Kenner's proposals in regards to possible correspondences between Beckett's *Three Novels* and *The Odyssey*, etc., were not taken up by most of the critical community, the linking of Beckett and Descartes, due at least in part though not entirely to Kenner, was a common practice in subsequent Beckett criticism, so much so that Anthony Ullman describes the application of Descartes to Beckett as "the great commonplace of Beckett studies" (*Beckett and Poststructuralism* 158). Beckett has also been claimed as, in the 70s, either an existential humanist who ultimately affirms existence

(emphasis on the “I’ll go on” in *The Unnamable’s* closing “you can’t go on, I must go on, I’ll go on”) or a Schopenhauerian pessimist who denies all value except the transient solace of art (emphasis on the “you can’t go on”), with the 80s moving on to a post-structuralist focus on how Beckett exposes the inevitable slippages of language (emphasis on the co-existence of the “you” and “I” to refer to what is ostensibly the same speaker). Following the wealth of new information on Beckett’s personal engagement with philosophy brought to light by James Knowlson’s landmark 1996 biography *Damned To Fame*, which made available to scholars decades worth of notes and letters written by Beckett, Beckett studies took what Matthew Feldman describes in his 2015 *Falsifying Beckett* as “the archival turn,” (19) with Feldman himself arguing for the relevancy of phenomenology to Beckett’s novels based on Beckett’s reading of Sartre’s 1936 *The Imagination*, in which Sartre provides an exegesis of Husserl, and the subsequent appearance in *Watt* of what Feldman calls “the phenomenological rendering of intellection ... [and] the vexed relation for a conscious subject depicting objects as they are perceived” (258).

Although I would disagree with the idea that Beckett endorses existentialism or any other -ism, it would also be wrong to contend that philosophy has no relevance to Beckett, as his work makes constant reference to philosophers and their ideas, such as, to choose just a few examples, the description of Murphy’s Occasionalist-like mind as a “large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without,” (*Murphy* 65) Molloy’s invocation of “the image of old Geulincx, dead young,” (*Three Novels* 46) or Malone’s memory of a parrot’s mangling of the famous Aquinas maxim “*Nihil in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu*” (“Nothing is in the intellect that is not first in the senses”) with the parrot only able to repeat the opening “*Nihil in intellectu*,” (*Three Novels* 212) an aposiopesis that undermines the empirical certainty of the original phrase. Overall, the problem is that, as phenomenology expert Dermot Moran describes in his article “Beckett and Philosophy,” Beckett is “the most philosophical of twentieth-century writers,” (93) but “overemphasizing the supposed

philosophical message ... tends to downplay the extraordinary humor and anarchic subversion of any overarching fixed meaning” (103) found therein. Beckett does not endorse existentialism or post-structuralism; he satirizes them. Although the texts might at times appear to endorse or resemble a specific position, that position is always nullified by the subsequent inclusion of its antithesis in a “humorous deflationary counterpoint” (Moran, “Beckett and Philosophy” 94) that leaves only paradoxes, fragments of ideas, or, as Molloy says, “points of detail instead of ... the essence of the system,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 20) because for Beckett there is no system, only a “kind of arbitrary collection or bricolage of philosophical ideas” (Moran, “Beckett and Philosophy” 93).

While Beckett never endorses philosophy, he must still inhabit it to destroy it from the inside, and I argue in this paper that each of his first five novels has a specific philosophical target that is being satirized, a target revealed by each novel's form. In outlining the contours of these targets, I might appear to be “defining literature,” but one has to at least know the subject of a joke in order to laugh in the right spots, and my argument is that the focus of Beckett's satire changes across novels, rather than that Beckett's actual belief system changes, as he consistently has none. In response to Ulrika Maude and Matthew Feldman's introduction to 2009's *Beckett and Phenomenology* in which they lament that while phenomenology “bear[s] substantial relevance to Beckett's work,” such “phenomenological approaches have been few and far between,” (2) I will argue that the *Three Novels* can be best understood as a satire of phenomenology, with the phylogeny of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*'s structural progression recapitulating the ontogeny of Husserl's method only to highlight that method's inadequacies.

To make that argument, this paper consists of four main sections. Since my claim hinges on the belief that Beckett repudiates any philosophical stance, I begin by drawing from several interviews and letters to demonstrate that Beckett's overall attitude toward philosophy is one of skepticism. This immediately brings up the problem of whether skepticism also qualifies as a position, with the denial of

affirmation itself an affirmation of denial, and I accommodate this paradox, and account for the difficulty involved in Beckett referring to philosophical positions without assuming them, by arguing that Beckett's novels can only be understood as a satire, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against any stance they temporarily inhabit. To provide both a working concept of satire and an initial paradigm through which to view Beckett's early novels as a whole, I end the first section by applying Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of satire from *Rabelais and His World* to Beckett's pentalogy.

In the second section, I look at *Murphy* and *Watt* through the lens of the rational tradition, linking *Murphy* to the Occasionalism of Descartes and Arnold Geulincx, and, after arguing that the repressive logicism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the culmination of Descartes' mathematical impulses, connecting *Watt* to early Wittgenstein.¹ While the well-worn ground of the parallels between Descartes and Beckett's work is not my main focus, and in fact I am arguing that such an approach is inadequate to the complexities of the *Three Novels*, it is necessary to show how Beckett began by destroying the past tradition before I can show how he then moved on to demolishing contemporary philosophy once he began writing in French in 1946. Also, I believe that in each of the five novels the structure is determined by the philosophical target, but this is more readily apparent in both *Murphy* and *Watt*, so examining them before turning to the *Three Novels* offers convincing evidence that the *Three Novels* employ a similar strategy.

In the third and main section, I draw from Matthew Feldman's recent archival work to argue that Beckett's post-war fiction had phenomenology in its crosshairs rather than Descartes, and that this helps explain the linear process that begins in *Molloy* and shudders to a halt in *The Unnamable*. In particular, I account for the problematic simultaneity of the Molloy and Moran sections in the first novel through reference to Eugen Fink's conception of the phenomenological process as requiring an initial step of

¹ This does not apply to the later Wittgenstein, because the *Philosophical Investigations* is in my opinion mainly an attempt to exorcise Descartes from his ideas, which leads him to reject both the theory of consciousness as depiction and the possibility of language having a solely logical foundation.

two concurrent actions, the bracketing of the world and the reduction of experience to phenomena. I then argue that Malone's stories about his proxy figure Sapo represent a failed attempt at eidetic variation (the search for essential qualities through the imaginative variation of components), before highlighting the many generative parallels between *The Unnamable* and Husserl's argument in Chapter 49 of *Ideas I* that consciousness, described in a later section as “in and for itself indescribable,” (154) could survive a “nullifying of the world of things” (89).

One of the main benefits of my description of Beckett's novels as a parody of phenomenology is that such a view also accounts for the many congruencies between Beckett's fiction and post-structuralism, in that the reasons for the failure of the phenomenological method as parodied by the *Three Novels* (and why those novels satirize phenomenology rather than embrace it) is that the phenomenological voice as medium of consciousness can only present itself through the exterior slippages of language, and its presentation can therefore never reach any essential presence. To end this section, I show how, concurrent to the *Three Novels*' recapitulation of the phenomenological process, the attendant critiques of that process which highlight its numerous failures resemble the evolution of Derrida's own critiques of Husserl from 1953's *The Problem of Origin in Husserl* to 1967's *Voice and Phenomenon*.

In the fourth and final section, I examine how the structure of each novel is determined by its philosophical object of parody, then compare the most distinctive linguistic features of each of the five novels to demonstrate how their differences correspond to the switch from a focus on Descartes to Husserl, with *Murphy* attempting a Cartesian one-to-one correspondence that reveals essential meaning, *Watt* seeking to force the synchronization of world and language through the imperial logic of the system, and the *Three Novels* being forced, in the absence of essential or logical meaning, to rely solely on repetition, with the rate of frequency for that repetition increasing exponentially at the end of *The Unnamable* as indication of that repetition's ultimate failure to provide any stable foundation for

meaning. While it is impossible to entirely avoid thematic analysis (form is content, content form, after all) and therefore unavoidable that I engage at least in part in the “combat” Beckett so loathed, I would stress as a final note before proceeding that my emphasis will at least be on using thematic content to understand form rather than the more common opposite approach, and I hope as a result to fail better in my efforts than some of those who have failed before me.

II. Terms of Engagement

Interviewer: Have contemporary philosophers had any influence on your thought?

Beckett: I never read philosophers.

Interviewer: Why not?

Beckett: I never understand anything they write.

Interviewer: All the same, people have wondered if the existentialists' problem of being may afford a key to your works.

Beckett: There's no key or problem. I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their principles in philosophic terms. – Samuel Beckett Interview, 1961

It is quotes like the above that lead me to found this study on the belief that Beckett and his novels do not assume any specific philosophical position, but only parodically inhabit them to reveal their contradictions. Whenever asked, Beckett consistently maintained this rejection of any ultimate statement or allegorical intent throughout his life, so there is no reason to suspect him of a Duchamp-like duplicity here, and it is illuminating to quote the rest of Beckett's response:

One cannot speak anymore of being, one must speak only of the mess. When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess. (as quoted, Feldman, *Falsifying Beckett* 75)

For someone claiming ignorance of philosophy, Beckett's reference to Heidegger and Sartre's notion of the difference between being and existence shows that he knew more than he was letting on, and Matthew Feldman has used Beckett's journals and notes to demonstrate that Beckett was rejecting

philosophy from a position of “learned ignorance” (*Falsifying Beckett* 77) after an intense engagement with the Western tradition that spanned from 1928 to 1938. According to Feldman, from 1928-32 Beckett showed an initial interest in Descartes before moving on to Schopenhauer, taking extensive notes on the pessimistic *The World as Will and Representation*. Beckett's reading from 1932-36 moved away from direct sources to large-scale historical surveys, especially Wilhelm Windelband's 1901 *A History of Philosophy*, with Beckett paying closest attention to Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, and displaying a consistent interest in problems surrounding the subject/object relationship (Feldman, *Falsifying Beckett* 79). Beckett's notebooks also reflect a strong focus on the pre-Socratics, with more than half of the entries taken up by anecdotes of their paradoxes and sophistries (Feldman, *Falsifying Beckett* 132). From 1936 to 1938, Beckett moved back to direct sources, going to Trinity University to read the *Ethics* of obscure Occasionalist Arnold Geulincx before moving on to the contemporary linguistic philosophy of Fritz Mauthner's *Contributions to a Critique of Language*, which problematizes language's ability to represent the world because in the Kantian view “human concepts are always attached to pictorial ideas” and as a result our language and thinking can never capture the thing-in-itself, are only “metaphorical” (as quoted, Feldman, *Falsifying Beckett* 82). Beckett's “struggle with philosophy” (Feldman, *Falsifying Beckett* 83) then concludes² with a reading of Sartre's 1936 *The Imagination*, where Sartre offers phenomenology as a solution to this problem of representation, and to which I will return to in the section on the *Three Novels*.

In taking these notes, particularly those on the pre-Socratics, Beckett shows that he is looking not for any solutions offered by philosophy, but for the most spectacular examples of philosophy's failures. Beckett wrote in his “German Diary” in 1937 that while reading Windelband and other sources, he was most interested not in gaining any summary comprehension of philosophical ideas but

2 This is not to indicate that Beckett stopped reading philosophy because he felt as if he had resolved any issues at this point, but more that he felt reading philosophy was no longer of use to him.

rather in gathering the anecdotal, the “straws, flotsam, etc. names, dates, births and deaths' of specific, individual lives” (as quoted, Feldman, *Falsifying Beckett* 199). Lacking any actual belief in philosophy, Beckett takes an ironic joy in the most extreme philosophical positions, positions whose absurdities argue against their own validity, such as the paradoxical sophistries of Protogoras and Heraclitus, or Berkeley's idealistic “*Esse est percipere*” (“To be is to be perceived”). In 1956 Beckett described his method for gleaning in the following terms:

I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine: 'Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned.' That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters. (as quoted, Tucker 17)

This desire for a self-annulling “wonderful shape,” rather than any focus on the content of the phrase, helps explain Beckett's consistent appreciation for and employment of paradox. The only philosophical “keys” to his work are paradoxical phrases that acknowledge their own limits, as Beckett provided in a 1967 letter:

If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work, my points of departure would be the 'Naught is more real ...' and '*Ubi nihil vales ...*' both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational. (as quoted, Tucker 39)

The full quotes referenced here are from Democritus (“Nothing is more real than nothing”) and Arnold Geulincx (“*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*” or “Where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing”), and the fact that Beckett refers in 1967 to quotes found in his first novel suggest that his attitude changed little over the intervening period of time. Even on first glance, it is obvious that the chiasmus of these phrases seems to cancel out any resultant meaning. That initial impression is only strengthened when analyzing the theme and context of these phrases. Geulincx will be covered more in the next section, but the basic thrust of his saying is that when one does not fully understand, one should not act. Since Geulincx was an Occasionalist who believed that only God fully understood and was responsible for all action,

in every occasion one is “worth nothing” and to act ethically one should therefore continuously recognize their own ignorance and “want nothing.”

This paradoxical embrace of abstention leads to the Democritus quote, which is in response to Zeno's logical quandaries. Zeno argued that physical movement was impossible, since movement would require empty space to move into, a void or nothingness. According to the sophist logic of Zeno and Parmenides, a “nothing” cannot exist, because if it exists then it is a “something,” and therefore motion is impossible, despite our experience of it, since the void motion requires is also impossible. Democritus' retort is willing to affirm the paradoxical “somethingness” of nothingness which Zeno's logic denied, responding that “nothing is more real than nothing” because motion occurs, but this should not be taken as indicating some pragmatic embrace of experience or empirical certainty, as Democritus also denies the validity of perception due to his belief in an atomistic universe in which all matter consists of smaller parts that cannot be perceived by humans. So if Democritus rejects both logic and experience, what is left to embrace?

This brings up the question of whether Beckett's position is best described as closest to the ancient Greek school of Skepticism, and whether his denial of a position is itself a position, with my answer being no on both counts. While Beckett and the Skeptic pre-Socratics would both seem to deny the possibility of certain knowledge, the intended result of that denial for the Skeptics was the tranquility of *ataraxia*. Since Democritus offers a paradoxical response to a paradoxical response, however, and seeks to destroy tranquility rather than reinforce it, I would argue that this self-reflexive form of skepticism does not qualify as a position, as it is skeptical even of skepticism, and it is this exponential form of doubt, a doubt that doubts itself, that Beckett also employs. It's not the case with Beckett that one at least knows that one does not know, as even that certainty is undermined, left uncertain

rather than definitively rejected. This is best demonstrated in *Molloy*, when Molloy says that

to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker. It is then the true division begins, of twenty-two by seven, for example, and the pages fill with the true ciphers at last. But I would rather not affirm anything on this subject. (Beckett, *Three Novels* 58)

It is key here that while Molloy references *ataraxia* as a desirable state, it is one that he does not personally possess, one that he longs for but cannot affirm as his narrative moves constantly forward, just as he could not reach the endpoint of dividing twenty-two by seven. While of course logically one can always protest that the embrace of abstention is still an embrace, this is the precise type of logic that Democritus and Beckett are attempting to reject, and much of the appeal of Beckett's fiction lies in the monomaniacal effort expended to erase the ever-changing trace of residual positionality that such logic imposes, a process that could be likened to watching someone attempt to clean their hands with dirty soap. Rather than the peace of abstaining, Beckett constantly fights to negate his current position, then negate the implicit affirmation hidden within that negation, then negate that negation, *ad infinitum*. The goal is to abstain from abstaining, to not choose without choosing to not choose, an impossible task, hence the constant emphasis on failure throughout his oeuvre, and why I wouldn't class Beckett with the Skeptics, despite their many coterminous points. Mistaking skepticism for a position in Beckett is to interrupt the prisoner mid-escape attempt and declare the prison his or her true home.

To reject both the senses and the mind, to reject even rejection itself, is an absurd situation, enough to make someone laugh or cry, right? The classical tradition would agree, as while currently Democritus is associated primarily with atomism, for most of Western history, especially in Renaissance art, Democritus was known as the laughing philosopher, often paired with Heraclitus, known as the weeping philosopher. This view of Democritus as the epitome of the mocking spirit offers a final perspective on the problem of Beckett's own views on philosophy. Any positive philosophical

claim that seeks to resolve the problems of the subject/object relationship is always met by Beckett with mockery, and that mockery is the only absolute, the only position one could possibly force upon Beckett, because it least resembles the vulnerable affirmation of a typical stance. If the prison of a position is inescapable, then the mocker at least never stops attacking their cage, whereas the goal of *ataraxia* is to learn how to sing in one's chains like the sea. Finally, I'd offer that I do recognize the logical impossibility of my argument here, and that rationally the position of Beckett's satirical skepticism qualifies a position, but I'd also argue that both sides of this coin are inadequate, that a non-positional skepticism is a paradox, but also that to define skepticism as an affirmation of negation is to misconstrue it according to its own terms, to confuse the negative method of doubting with the positive end results of that process. Given these two unsatisfactory choices, I'm choosing to go with the option also embraced by the texts and author, both of which clearly display an appreciation for paradox, making positionality the problem rather than the solution.

Since my views on Beckett's lack of a position eliminate the possible adequacy of any one philosophical perspective in offering a synoptic view, I'd like to now use the notion of Democritus as the laughing philosopher to propose a different paradigm by which to approach Beckett's early novels as a whole, that of satire. In *Rabelais and His World* (written 1940, published 1965), Mikhail Bakhtin proposes that Rabelaisian Medieval satire is best understood as accomplishing the subversion of dominant hierarchies through the laughing embrace of the ever-changing grotesque. In opposition to state-sponsored official feasts, which consecrate "all that is stable, unchanging ... the triumph of a truth already established" and are "monolithically serious," (Bakhtin 9) Rabelais celebrates the spirit of the carnival, which takes place outside of the consecrated space, and is "the feast of becoming, change and renewal ... hostile to all that was immortalized and completed" (Bakhtin 10). The rituals of the carnival are based on the universality of laughter, which frees participants "from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety" (Bakhtin 7). This laughter destroys individual values and

boundaries to become “the laughter of all people ... universal in scope” (Bakhtin 11). Importantly in relation to Democritus' self-reflexive mockery, carnival laughter is “also directed at those who laugh,” (Bakhtin 12) a laughter that destroys and renews simultaneously and does not exempt itself in this process. Using the abusive speech of the market rather than the official, sanitized speech of the state or church, carnival laughter embraces profanity to celebrate the vulgar functions which are normally repressed, the bowels and genitals, highlighting what Bakhtin describes as the “grotesque realism of the body,” which is always “a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis” (24). This embrace of the “lower stratum of the body,” (Bakhtin 21) while “deeply positive,” results in the subversion of official forms, the “degradation ... [and] lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract ... to the material level” (Bakhtin 19) of the earth and its ambivalent fertility which turns birth into death and death into life in a constant state of flux similar to Heraclitus. The grotesque body embraced through the carnival spirit is a force of renewal, no longer “separated from the rest of the world ... it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits” (Bakhtin 26).

You might be thinking at this point that if I'm going to argue that Beckett's work acts as a positive embrace of the medieval grotesque body as a site of universal flux, then I will be directly contradicting my central stance that Beckett is apositional. However, while traces of this medieval form of satire appear occasionally, particularly in *Molloy*, it is not the type of satire Beckett most frequently employs. According to Bakhtin, Medieval satire, which functions as a positive embrace of the always-ambivalent grotesque, has since been suppressed, starting in the Renaissance when notions of the vulgar nature of the carnivalesque body began to be replaced by the dogmatism of rationality, and the body was increasingly conceived of as a “completed, finished product ... isolated, alone” (29). Post-Enlightenment that rationality and attendant individuality becomes even more dominant, and satire moves from celebrating humanity's universal physicality to expressing the bitterness of an isolated subject, “cut down to cold humor, irony, sarcasm,” (Bakhtin 38) with modern satire having “a solely

negative character ... deprived of regenerating ambivalence,” (Bakhtin 22) which is much closer to Beckett. The grotesque as divorced from the body can now only inspire terror, stemming from the Romantics, whose discovery of the always-changing “interior subjective man with his depth, complexity, and inexhaustible resources” (Bakhtin 44) led them to challenge “the cold rationalism ... [and] official, formalistic, and logical authoritarianism” of the Enlightenment's “narrow and artificial optimism” (Bakhtin 37). The positive aspect of satire is absent, however, as rather than participating in a celebration shared by all, the Romantic individual's isolation causes satirical laughter to become bitter, melancholic, shrinking in fear from a monstrous, alien world. Madness is no longer festive, “a gay parody of official reason,” but instead “acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation” (Bakhtin 39) and the mask, which in the carnival covers “the playful element of life,” now has behind it only “a terrible vacuum, a nothingness” (Bakhtin 40). Bakhtin ends by claiming that the Romantic grotesque was adopted by the modernists³ and then “evolved under the influence of existentialism,” (46) but that this evolution only increased the sense of isolated alienation, as “the gay and regenerating element” (51) of the true grotesque was still absent.

Bakhtin's thoughts on satire offer a division between the official hierarchy (rational, orderly, particular, clean, fixed) and the subversive force of satire (illogical, chaotic, universal, vulgar, always-changing) which can be used as a general approach for all of Beckett's novels. Bakhtin says of Rabelais that his work has “a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature” with which “no dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist,” (3) and the same is true of Beckett. In cultural terms, Beckett's early novels, always featuring a comic Irish protagonist, could be read as the attack of Irishness against the dominant European order as represented by the English in *Murphy* (Murphy lives in London) or the French in the *Three Novels*, which not only were written in French but also have a first novel with two parts that contrast the Irish vulgarity of Molloy with Moran, the most

3 Alfred Jarry is the example given by Bakhtin.

French character in the series and the only one inclined toward “that most fruitful of dispositions, horror of the body and its functions” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 113). In terms of plot, any time a stable point is reached, that stability is always immediately undermined by an unforeseen, often vulgar occurrence, such as in *Watt* when a pages-long description of the absurdly intricate formal patterns by which five academics in a thesis hearing could look at each other in succession without repeating a step is interrupted by a “frankly revolting vapor arising from among the recesses of Mr. Magershon's body-linen” (145). The ease with which the vulgarity of the body erases the intolerable officiousness of proceedings reveals the fragile absurdity of those unnecessary convolutions, the failure of their ability to repress the unfinished body through codification. Another example of an effort at systemization being abruptly abandoned in a manner which reveals the system's irrelevancy is when Molloy goes to great lengths to arrive at an order for sucking his stones, then ends by simply throwing the stones away.

Bakhtin's distinction between a regenerative laughter that affirms the universal body and a bitter laughter that only negates an alien world also helps with the problem of whether or not Beckett is an optimistic existential humanist or pessimistic Schopenhauerian, as I would argue that the pentalogy contains both types of humor, and therefore exhibits both optimistic and pessimistic tendencies, making it neither overall. Molloy in particular displays a disgusting vitality of the body that offers the most comic moments in the five novels, such as when a policeman asks Molloy for identification papers and Molloy confusedly presents the representative of law and order with the newspaper Molloy uses to wipe his rectum, or when Molloy worries that the only time he had sexual intercourse, he might have accidentally penetrated the woman's rectum, and therefore he cannot say he has ever known true love. Parallel to the increasing dissolution of the characters' bodies, breaking down from a limp to a crawl to a permanent stasis, the grotesque in the *Three Novels* increasingly shifts from comedy to horror, and *The Unnamable*, while still a satire, is the least comic of the novels under examination. Since the body is almost entirely absent by the series' end, the *Unnamable* lacks any connection outside of himself and

can only mock his own isolation as he repeatedly tries and fails to remove his own mask to reveal the vacuum underneath.

Finally, having seen how Bakhtin's binary applies to these novels as a whole, I'd like to briefly show how it applies to each novel on an individual basis. The basic terms of *Murphy* are that Murphy wants to retreat into the pure isolation of mind, but is always pulled back to the world by the urges of his body, particularly his sexual attraction to Celia, which undermines the validity of Murphy's solipsistic efforts. *Watt*, as already described above, consists mostly of lists that work through the logical possibilities of a situation in an attempt to understand it, only to then dissolve that understanding when a new possibility arises that destroys all progress. In what meager plot there is, the questioning nature of the main character (Watt/What?) is canceled out by the nullifying force of Mr. Knott (Not/Naught/Knot), which also indicates a general repudiation of official knowledge. *Molloy* juxtaposes Molloy, the most joyously disgusting of all Beckett's "M" characters, against Moran, the most sanctimonious and repressive. *Malone Dies* still displays the occasional reference to Malone's body with the attendant vulgar comedy, as when he interrupts tales of his surrogate figure Sapo to remind himself "to eat and excrete ... dish and pot, dish and pot, those are the poles," (Beckett, *Three Novels* 179) but these mentions of the body, along with the humor, drain away as Malone approaches death and his corporeal being becomes increasingly irrelevant, a process Malone describes as "being given ... birth into death" with his feet "clear already of the great cunt of existence" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 276). *The Unnamable* can be read on the simplest terms as demonstrating the terror and alienation that occur when subjective consciousness is divorced from the material body and its link to the universal. Having offered these broad assessments, I will now turn to an examination of the differing philosophical targets of each novel's satire.

III. Initial Skirmishes: *Murphy* and *Watt*

A. Murphy

The problem was of little interest. Any solution would do. – Samuel Beckett,
Murphy

In his first novel, *Murphy*, Beckett parodies both Descartes and modernism, with vision being the link between the two. For Descartes, knowledge is vision, clarity of sight, and modernist novels were written in the third-person, meaning that their subjects were seen rather than heard, even during interior monologues. In *Murphy*, Beckett challenges both Cartesian surety and the modernist epiphanic, showing the uselessness of both when there is nothing worth seeing. The world of *Murphy* is created according to the concepts of Descartes, particularly the separation of mind and body, but *Murphy* lacks the meaning-giving presence of God, and the resulting existence is therefore absurd, as are the modernist methods used to depict it.

Although he was famously Joyce's amanuensis, Beckett most clearly states his views on modernism, or what for him is just contemporary literary fiction, in *Proust*, his 1930 critical essay. Beckett's thoughts on Proust are decidedly idiosyncratic, more Beckettian than Proustian, and present in stark terms the impossible task of furthering the modernist tradition that faced a developing author in 1930. The worldview in *Proust* is bleak even by Beckett's standards, with the individual helpless before unrelenting Time, which "has deformed us" (512). In *Proust's* definition of identity, each person is always changing and therefore radically discontinuous, a series of selves rather than a single self. Attainment or satisfaction for the individual then becomes impossible, because attainment requires "the identification of the subject with the object of his desire ... [and] the subject has died – perhaps many times – on the way" (Beckett, *Proust* 513). Trapped in this hopeless situation, in need of solace, one has only habit to deaden experience and memory to offer the illusion of a brief respite. True escape occurs in rare flashes through an epiphanic moment of involuntary memory, which "in its flame has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can

and never will reveal – the real” (Beckett, *Proust* 523).” Rather than producing naturalist fiction with objective descriptions of empirical reality, which amounts to nothing but “worshipping the offal of experience... content to transcribe the surface, the facade, behind which the Idea is prisoner,” (Beckett, *Proust* 546) the modernist writer relies upon involuntary memory to purify his or her vision of the distorting force of the will, reaching not around but through subjectivity to grasp the noumenon. This revelation results in the merging of form and content, with “the one the concretion of the other,” (Beckett, *Proust* 547) the revelation of the thing incarnate rather than a description of the thing, allowing the modernist author to capture “the essential reality that is denied” (Beckett, *Proust* 544) to mundane existence and conventional fiction. To further the work of Proust and other modernists, one must, like them, become “pure Subject ... almost exempt from the impurity of will” and produce novels that have been “purified in the transcendental aperception that can capture the Model, the Idea, the Thing-in-itself” (Beckett, *Proust* 552).

With that as his checklist, no wonder Beckett was in therapy for depression at the time. Sitting down at the desk with pen in hand, what came to Beckett was a savage parody of an impossible method, producing a novel that uses the third-person omniscient narrative to reveal existence as a boring irrelevancy and therefore undermine the worth of revelation as a whole. Throughout *Murphy*, there is a tone of someone insulting that which has rejected him. This is most obvious in the hyper-obscure vocabulary and unnecessary allusions such as to “the extreme theophanism of William of Champeaux,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 49) ridiculing the pedantic referentiality of Joyce and Eliot, but even *Murphy*'s first line, “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new,” (1) exemplifies this tendency, as it is an aggressively terrible opening to a novel. From the widest view possible, this opening tells us that nothing exists in the universe of *Murphy* that is of genuine interest, and the uselessness of the third-person perspective not only makes it impossible to identify with the world or its characters, it also calls into question the value of the modernist epiphanic and the grand Idea that is

being sought after. When Murphy dies toward the end and his ashes are dismissively stomped into the floor of a pub, it merely confirms what was clear from the start: that none of this matters in the slightest. It is not that the modernist method of revelation fails to reveal, it is that what it reveals is nothing but pedantic trifles or a self-defeating talent for the inopportune, telling us at the start of Chapter 3 that the moon is “29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 17) when that information clarifies nothing, despite Murphy's love for astrology, or elsewhere declaring that “the above passage is carefully calculated to deprave the cultivated reader” (Beckett, *Murphy* 71) when such a narrative intrusion interrupts that depravity and thereby stymies its own purpose by puncturing any erotic momentum. The overall effect is not that we distrust the narrative perspective, but instead that we come to believe there is nothing worthwhile for it to view. When Murphy is described as a “seedy solipsist,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 50) the satire is not that Murphy is actually not a solipsist, as he undoubtedly is one, but instead the joke is on the value of value-judgments in general, since, as we know from *Proust*, there is “no communication possible because there are no vehicles of communication possible” (539). This is a necessary distinction to make before moving on to an examination of the contents described, as *Murphy's* (and also by necessity *Murphy's*, since form is content) project is doomed from the start. Beckett is not writing the type of satire, such as the political, where he is advocating for the opposite of what he describes; that for example empiricism is the way out of Murphy's solipsism. Murphy is not an example of what not to do, he is an example of how nothing one does matters. What makes Murphy worth observing is that detailing how he gets it all wrong is the best possible way to make it obvious that there is no getting it right, because Murphy lives out the failure of philosophy.

Since it spends an entire chapter describing Murphy's mind as separate from his body, and because the chapters tend to alternate between Murphy or mind-centric and Celia or world-centric chapters, recapitulating the mind-body divide in its form, Occasionalism provides the traditional lens

through which to view *Murphy*, and I would agree with Kenner that *Murphy's* most salient feature is its skewering of Descartes, so it is now necessary to review Descartes' method as described in the *Discourse on Method* and *Meditations on First Philosophy* before showing how Murphy gets that method all wrong, undermining not only Murphy's efforts but the method itself. Descartes, realizing that much of what appears to be certain knowledge is in fact mere "custom and example," (9) decides to employ a method of universal doubt, tearing down the foundations of knowledge to rebuild them upon a rational certainty modeled after mathematics. Descartes describes his method as consisting of the following four steps:

The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not plainly know to be such; that is to say, carefully to avoid hasty judgment and prejudice; and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and so distinctly that I had no occasion to call it in doubt.

The second, to divide each of the difficulties I would examine into as many parts as possible and as was required in order to better resolve them.

The third, to conduct my thoughts in an orderly fashion, by commencing with those objects that are simplest and easiest to know, in order to ascend little by little, as by degrees, to the knowledge of the most composite things, and by supposing an order even among those things that do not naturally precede one another.

And the last, everywhere to make enumerations so complete and reviews so general that I was assured of having omitted nothing. (11)

And do the results of this method come up with anything for Descartes? Why, only that he must "regard the heavens, the air, the earth, colors, shapes, sounds, and all external things as nothing but the bedeviling hoaxes of [his] dreams," (Descartes 62) since all of existence could be an illusion created by an evil deceiver god.

This possibility of universal deception leads Descartes to reject entirely the evidence of the senses, retreating to the realm of pure mind, which is a separate substance from the body, and it is only in that mind that Descartes finds any initial certainty, arguing that even if his thoughts are deceived, he

indubitably still has those thoughts, and therefore he exists, if not physically, then at least as a “thinking thing” (65). While the body is a composite that can always be further divided, the mind is a single, unified substance, albeit one that lacks the power to have created either the world or itself. Since there must be a primary cause, Descartes declares that God must exist, and “as what is more perfect ... cannot come into being from what is less perfect,” (73) God is therefore perfect and does not deceive us in our perceptions of the world. While there is a correspondence between the body and mind, there is not direct causation, since God is responsible for all action in each occasion, hence the name “Occasionalism” was later given to this school of thought.

The reason why it is necessary to understand the illegitimacy of the third-person omniscient narrator in *Murphy* before discussing the Cartesian influence proposed by Kenner and others is that Descartes' entire system, despite his appeals to logic, rests only on God, and in *Murphy* God is either absent, grown bored with the “nothing new,” or has turned into an idiot, replaced by the tale of Suk's horoscope which signifies nothing. Kenner rightly describes the basic framework as revolving around the problem that Murphy's “body loves Celia... while his mind abhors the complications she introduces” (*Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* 51). Using the mind/body division as his point of departure, Murphy wants nothing more than to escape into the realm of pure mind, to be “not free but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 66) but he cannot overcome his body's “deplorable susceptibility to Celia” (Beckett, *Murphy* 103). Kenner doesn't point this out, since he focuses only on thematic content, but this division between body and mind also determines the structure of the novel's 13 chapters, which alternate between Murphy/mind chapters and Celia/body (or Neary et. al/world, which amounts to the same thing) and with Chapter 6 as what David Tucker in *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx: A Literary Fantasia* describes as “the novel's abstract dead center” (49). In this chapter, Beckett demonstrates most clearly his method of parodying Descartes and other Occasionalists, so it requires special attention.

For Descartes, only the mind can be fully known to itself, the world is uncertain, and the metaphor for knowledge or truth is a visual one, “the clear and distinct,” meaning that truth is light or the fully seen. Murphy thinks of his mind in Cartesian terms, “a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 65) but unlike Descartes' notion of the mind as an indivisible substance, Murphy's mind consists of three zones, “light, half light, dark, each with its specialty,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 67) with the “light” closest to the world or “forms with parallel,” the “half light” pure interior contemplation or “forms without parallel,” and the “dark” pure mind, a “flux of forms” or “matrix of surds”⁴ (Beckett, *Murphy* 68). Even if Descartes was going to divide the mind into three zones, the correlation should be the exact opposite, with the pure mind as the region of light, fully known to itself as a thinking-thing, and the region closest to the obfuscation of the world as the dark. It is not just that Murphy misconstrues Descartes, it's that he uses Descartes' method to arrive at a position that is diametrically opposed to Descartes' own. It's a deliberate inversion⁵ rather than an accidental flaw. This is why it's necessary to reference Descartes when explicating *Murphy*, since one can't get the joke unless one knows the subject of that joke, but also why Beckett can't be confused for a Cartesian, since in a parody much of the joke lies not in the violence of negative results, but in the precise aptness of those negative results as an inversion of that which the parody inhabits and thereby destroys. That aptness can only be achieved by someone who knows their target well, but to study it in such fashion they must possess an assassin's detachment.

Chapter 6 also explains why Murphy is happy to adopt Suk's horoscope as his guiding celestial principle, despite its lack of obvious help. Since Murphy only cares about dissolving in the realm of pure mind (not his individual mind, but the universal mind), he is content to merely “accept this partial congruence of the world of his mind with the world of his body as due to some ... process of

4 Surds are irrational numbers, another deliberate inversion of Descartes, since for Descartes math is the height of the rational.

5 On the part of the author, not on the part of Murphy

supernatural determination,” but Murphy's narcissism means the nature of that supernatural force is irrelevant, as long as it doesn't impede his escape to “the closed system” (Beckett, *Murphy* 66) of his mind, where he has absolute freedom of choice. This again is an exact inversion of Descartes, whose whole purpose was to use God as a means by which to verify the outside world. With God as absent or irrelevant, no longer able to certify the link between mind and world, Murphy's retreat results in self-love, the turning away from the world rather than the Cartesian search for a way back to it, hence the quote at the start of the chapter, “*Amor intellectualis quo Murphy se ipsum amat*” (“The intellectual love with which Murphy loves himself”), (65) which takes Spinoza's “*Deus se ipsum amore intellectuali infinito amat*” (“God loves himself with an infinite intellectual love”) and replaces God with Murphy to highlight Murphy's presumption.⁶

Murphy's arrogant self-absorption only increases as the novel continues, particularly when he begins working at the insane asylum and believes the patients to be more-perfect versions of himself, and it is at this point in the novel where the ethics of Arnold Geulincx become most relevant. Beckett began writing *Murphy* in 1935, and the writing had ground to a halt by early 1936 with Chapters 1-8 completed. After Beckett went to the Trinity Library in Dublin where he read Geulincx's *Ethics*, he wrote in a letter that he now sees the novel as a “break down” between Geulincx's “where you are worth nothing ...” and the Malraux quote which begins Chapter 9, “It is difficult for one who lives isolated from the everyday world to not seek others like himself” (as quoted, Tucker xiii). The Malraux quote can be applied to the fact that it is at this point in the novel where Murphy goes to work in an insane asylum, and is delighted by the “self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world” (Beckett *Murphy* 102) of the mental patients, believing that he has finally found others like himself. The Geulincx quote is opposed to Murphy's urge to find like-minded souls not because Geulincx advocates solitude, but because Geulincx's notion of the ethical highlights that

6 This is pointed out by David Tucker in *Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx*, 54.

Murphy misinterprets the Malraux-style urge for others by reducing them to himself, as Murphy also does to the stars and Suk's horoscope, his increased confidence in his methods causing him to now believe that “they were his stars, [and] he was the prior system” (Beckett, *Murphy* 110).

And why does Geulincx place such emphasis on ethics? Because not to do so is narcissistic, makes possible the placing of oneself at the center of existence rather than God, just as the chapter on Murphy's mind is placed near the center of the novel. In the Geulincxian universe, ethical responsibility is all one has, since God is responsible for everything else. Geulincx takes Descartes' notion of the mind/body split and makes it even more extreme, asserting “the radical incapacity and impotence of the human mind” (Tucker 13) to affect the world outside itself. While for Descartes the body and mind were linked in the pineal gland, Geulincx severs that link, likening the correspondence between mind and body as that between two clocks which tell the same time but do nothing to influence each other's motions. Where Descartes' method was dedicated to the search for truth, Geulincx sets that search aside as impossible, making ignorance the foundation of his philosophy. Since for Geulincx “in order to qualify as performing an action, [one] must have knowledge of this action,” (as quoted, Tucker 14) and since one always lacks such knowledge, the only remaining ethical choice is to abstain from all judgment. When Murphy, who thinks of himself as “of the little world” tries to stay in that little world as the insane are able to, he believes that he is unable to stay there because he is always dragged back out into “the big world” (Beckett, *Murphy* 106) by Celia and the rest. However, what actually prevents Murphy from becoming pure mind as he desires, as shown by Geulincx's emphasis on inaction, is precisely that Murphy desires it. The insane, in contrast, are abstention incarnate, as they simply not want without wanting to not want. By wanting to not want anything, Murphy commits the cardinal sin according to Geulincx, and Murphy's efforts can only result in narcissism, as shown by both the novel's climax, a chess game with Mr. Endon, and the novel's anti-climax, Murphy's senseless death.

Beckett set great importance on the chess game between Murphy and Mr. Endon (Greek for

“within”), refusing to excise it when asked by publishers, and even considering a cover that featured two monkeys playing chess. As David Tucker describes it, this chess game is where Murphy's self-defeating narcissism becomes most obvious. Since this argument requires an intricate knowledge of chess, I am reliant upon Tucker here, but find his points convincing. According to Tucker, Mr. Endon, nearly catatonic in his pure interiority, is the paragon of what Murphy hopes to be, as Endon has “a psychosis so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain” (Beckett, *Murphy* 112). The asymmetry between them is immediately obvious, as while Murphy desires Endon's lack of desire, Endon obviously does not respond in kind, because “Murphy is just chess for Endon” (Beckett, *Murphy* 145) instead of a person. Although they both sit at the same chess board, it quickly becomes clear that Murphy and Endon are playing two different games. Since Murphy views Endon as his idol, all Murphy wants is for his idol to recognize him, and this desire to be acknowledged both determines Murphy's chess strategy and expels him from the realm of Endon. As Tucker argues, this inability to rid himself of desire is why Murphy is always White⁷, as White goes first, is the aggressor rather than defender, and why this initial move is “the primary cause of all White's subsequent difficulties” (Beckett, *Murphy* 146) since it reveals “the original sin of Murphy's necessary assertion of self” (Tucker 63). Endon doesn't respond to any move Murphy makes, instead preferring to move his pieces in a manner which has nothing to do with chess, using them to repetitively create the same “monochrome visual pattern” (Tucker 64). Murphy's moves become increasingly chaotic as he struggles to elicit a response, any form of recognition from Endon, and to thereby interrupt the “closed system” (Tucker 64) of both Endon's chess game and mind. When Murphy sees that the next move in the repeating pattern of Endon's “irresistible game” (Beckett, *Murphy* 145) will cause Endon to illegally move himself into checkmate, and that clearly Endon is never going to take notice of him, Murphy instead surrenders, “as further solicitation would be frivolous and vexatious” (Beckett, *Murphy*

⁷ Endon refuses to play when given the active role of White

147) and to win this game for Murphy is to lose. Tucker concludes that the narcissism of Murphy's desire to be like Endon means that he can never become Endon, and will forever remain “a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen” (Beckett, *Murphy* 150).

Finally, I would argue that the results of Murphy's failure to achieve a Geulincxian withdrawal from all desire are made clear not only by his senseless death, but also by the manner in which his death occurs, since Murphy brings it on himself. Although Murphy immediately feels at home in his job at the asylum, he threatens to quit unless his room in the attic is furnished with heat. Murphy's demand is met by running a gas pipe into his room in rather unsafe fashion, and it is this gas that kills him. In a significant moment of foreshadowing, Murphy decides that “the etymology of gas” is “chaos,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 106) and therefore it is chaos that kills Murphy. Kenner aptly describes how in a different novel with moral values, a typical world where things mattered, this would be an angry moment, a moment that protested Murphy's mistreatment by fate or God, but clearly that is not the world of *Murphy* (*Samuel Beckett: A Critical Reader* 52). This chaos might still symbolize Murphy's defeat if Murphy had embraced the rational aspect of Cartesianism. However, since Murphy believes the darkness of absolute mind to be surds instead of rational numbers, an anarchic flux of forms rather than the stability of logical clarity as in Descartes, the chaos that kills Murphy is exactly what Murphy desired, “his body quiet” and his mind “free,” (Beckett, *Murphy* 151) with the final joke being that the selfless freedom Murphy craves is actually the destruction of the self. The reader laughs rather than cries at Murphy's death, because in a senseless world without God or inherent value, such a senseless death is not a tragedy, but an escape.

B. Watt

There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. If I wrote a book called *The World As I Found It*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or

rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could not be mentioned in that book. – Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.631

One of the great ironies of Descartes' thought is that while he claims that his method of doubting will rid his ideas of all presuppositions in the service of logic, he then makes several extravagantly metaphysical claims about God, without whose presence Descartes' system collapses. As *Murphy* has just shown, the absence of God leaves a pointless world from which one narcissistically flees into the dark of one's own mind. In response to this problem, much of Western philosophy post-Descartes came to rely less and less upon God as a foundational element and focused instead on the rationality that was Descartes' original goal. In my conception of the history of philosophy, this effort to mold the world into a logical framework culminated in the early work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein's extreme logicism, the end result of employing the Cartesian method, caused him to reject any possibility of describing the subject. Following *Murphy's* destruction of Descartes, Beckett used *Watt* to arrive at a similar conclusion. Whereas the parody of Descartes in *Murphy* was intentional, Beckett never read Wittgenstein, so the parody here is more a result of Beckett using the basics of Descartes, then intuiting the necessary results once God has been subtracted and only logic is left. If logic becomes dominant, then the subject will be gradually eliminated, because the subject can never be purely logical. The endless lists found in *Watt* use Descartes' method, but they push that method further than Descartes did to highlight of how little use logic is in describing the subject, mocking logic's limits. Wittgenstein pushes the logicity of Descartes to a similar extreme, but, in the *Tractatus* at least, he accepts those limits rather than challenging them through satire as Beckett does. Still, because the characters in *Watt* are almost entirely lacking in interiority, it is through Wittgenstein rather than Descartes that *Watt* should be read, because *Watt* is almost the book described by Wittgenstein in the above quote, in which the subject is unavailable to itself.

Watt's opacity means that it has attracted the widest array of critical approaches, often with

contradictory findings, and this confusion results from Watt's inchoate form. For example, *Watt* begins in the same third-person omniscient mode as *Murphy*, but then occasional mentions begin to creep in of an "I" voice, until we learn that Watt's story has actually been told to a second figure named Sam, both in a mental institution of some sort, and that Sam is telling the story from his limited perspective rather than some omniscient figure as we thought. This does not seem like some intentional move that Beckett was planning all along, as the text does little to hint at Sam's presence in the opening, but instead seems more like a spontaneous change that Beckett made mid-composition. Regardless, this means that even very basic questions cannot be answered, such as "Is *Watt* in the first or third-person?" This is a particularly important question because Feldman locates *Watt* as where Beckett begins to write phenomenologically, but to write phenomenologically requires the first-person perspective, because phenomenology, as Husserl says in *Ideas I*, is always starting "from the I" (57). For that reason, I would argue that while *Watt* does indeed show flashes of phenomenology's influence, such moments are still embryonic, rare enough that they are by no means the most distinctive feature of the novel. Other critics have tried to make of *Watt* a Freudian allegory, such as Daniel Katz in *Saying I No More*, but I feel that the lack of interiority means that such readings are grasping for straws, seeking to know when the novel asks for the opposite, as *Watt* consists mostly not of significant details, but insignificant details tortured through all the possibilities allowed within a logical syntax.

Kenner's reading of *Watt* in 1987's *The Mechanic Muse* would agree that the subject of *Watt* is "man the syntactic animal ... the man who must order names into structure," (103) with Kenner presciently describing Watt's obsession with reducing the world to a list of possibilities as "proto-computer language" (96). However, I have to depart from Kenner here for two reasons: first, that Kenner had already declared in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* that he considers *Watt* to be "the most engaging of Beckett's creations," (47) a suggestion that I find baffling and that makes me mistrust his judgment in reference to *Watt*, and also that Kenner's general reading in both *Samuel Beckett: A*

Critical Study and *The Mechanic Muse* is that *Watt* is an allegory for the impact of God's absence on Cartesian logic, in which “Beckett comes closer to the Cartesian spirit than Descartes himself, for Descartes, when he took his attention away from the immutable truths of mathematics, could resolve manifold confusions with God” (*Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* 120). And why exactly do I find Descartes inadequate for approaching *Watt*? After all, it could be considered a perfect example of steps three and four of Descartes' method, considering things in an “orderly fashion” and then, *ad nauseum*, the need to “make enumerations so complete and reviews so general” that one is sure of “having omitted nothing,” as in Watt's description of Mr. Knott's movements, mercifully excerpted:

Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire, from the fire to the bed; from the door to the fire, from the fire to the door; from the fire to the door, from the door to the fire; from the window to the bed, from the bed to the window; from the bed to the window, from the window to the bed; from the fire to the window, from the window to the fire ... (Beckett, *Watt* 167)

While this limits the logical possibilities and then enumerates their possible combinations so as to feign a complete understanding, what is actually omitted is any real knowledge of Knott or Watt themselves, their interior subjectivities. Whereas Descartes makes the *cogito* the foundation of his system, emphasizing it as the only certainty, the “I” of “I think” is entirely absent in *Watt*, and for that reason it is better read through Wittgenstein.

To understand why that is, only the briefest of glosses is necessary for Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Wittgenstein wants to propose a logical framework for logic in which “nothing is accidental” (9) by reducing language to its simplest parts, names or primitive signs that “cannot be dissected any further” (25) with these simple parts then given meaning via their syntactical groupings in composite statements that “restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no” (41). Determining the truth

then only requires the simple matter of verifying the correspondence between the statement and the fact, discovering the yes or no. Logical syntax itself can never be stated, however, it can only be demonstrated, because any statement attempting to define that syntax would itself be reliant upon that syntax, so that “what expresses itself in language, we cannot express by language,” and propositions “display” or “show the logical form of reality,” (Wittgenstein 51) but cannot comment upon it from an exterior position. As a result, any ultimate “sense of the world lies outside the world,” (Wittgenstein 145) and one can only speak of that which one can logically express, so that “the limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 115). Wittgenstein does not say that nothing exists that cannot be put into language⁸, but only that what cannot be spoken of cannot be logically known, and vice versa, so that “what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence” (Wittgenstein 151). The goal of philosophy is not to provide answers to metaphysical questions, but simply to identify which questions are metaphysical and therefore nonsensical and should be passed over in silence, to dissolve the question rather than resolve the problem, so that “the solution to the problem of life is seen as the vanishing of the problem” (Wittgenstein 149). One of the great peculiarities of Wittgenstein's system is that the main problem he dissolves is subjectivity itself, declaring that “there is no such thing as the soul, the subject, etc.,” (109) because the “I” is a logical tautology⁹, a purely deictic statement that only acts as placeholder to indicate the speaker. Most perversely, not only does the “I” lack sense, but Wittgenstein's entire system does as well, when judged by its own terms, since it provides a synoptic view of language while claiming that no such view is possible, making it like a “ladder” that one must “throw away ... after [one] has climbed it” (151).

I believe that Wittgenstein provides the best lens through which to view *Watt* precisely because *Watt* demonstrates, as does the *Tractatus*, that “the facts all contribute only to setting the problem, not

8 This is Wittgenstein's definition of the mythical

9 This is a complex argument, but suffice it to say that a statement can only have a positive meaning if it is possible for it to also have a negative meaning, and since the “I” is always assumed for the speaking of any statement, it cannot have a negative meaning, and therefore also cannot have a positive meaning.

to its solution” (Wittgenstein 149). As seen in the list of Mr. Knott's movements above, every word is as simple as possible, all one syllable except for “moved” and “window,” but these Wittgenstein-style “simples” can't ever add up to anything outside of their primitive, objective meaning, so that we learn nothing of Mr. Knott himself, because, as Watt says, “obscure keys may open simple locks, but simple keys obscure locks never” (Beckett, *Watt* 101). This means that the lists themselves are useless, always vulnerable to the intrusion of an unforeseen fact, since there is no possible view of the whole. A notable instance of this is in Part 2, where what should be the simple problem of feeding the remnants of Mr. Knott's meals to a dog, eliminating the last trace, instead spirals out into a 25-page description of all that is required to ensure that the dog fulfills its duties, including a caretaker family and their long genealogy. Despite all that effort, the uselessness of the system to contain the whole, to eliminate that final trace, is all that is demonstrated, as the systematizing efforts ends, as it does at the end of each list, with the recognition that

Not that for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play, in this particular instance, or even perceived the forms that they upheaved ... but he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for a head. (Beckett, *Watt* 94)

The form of the book itself demonstrates this inability to organize all into a tidy whole, since it ends with an addenda containing all the scraps that could not be fit elsewhere into the novel.

While Wittgenstein himself admits that logic cannot express the illogical or mystical, and *Watt* would thus just be a demonstration of the *Tractatus*, *Watt* also inverts the *Tractatus*, just as *Murphy* inverted Descartes, because in Watt's world, the simplest objects, the names which are the foundation from which Wittgenstein's logical system builds, are the most impossible to name once Watt enters Mr. Knott's house. This desire to name is Watt's only defining quality, the need for words “to be applied to his situation ... and in a general way to the conditions of being in which he found himself,” (Beckett, *Watt* 64) but this fails once Watt enters the realm of Knott, as demonstrated when even the pots in

Knott's kitchen fail to correspond fully to the name pot, a situation described thusly:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot ... it was in vain that Watt said, pot, pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected ... it resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted. It was in vain that it answered, with unexceptionable adequacy, all the purposes, and performed all the offices of a pot, it was not a pot. And it was just this hairbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot that so excruciated Watt. (Beckett, *Watt* 64)

If simples fail, as they do here, then the entire system is for naught, and the true nature of anything is unknowable. The comedy then is that Watt worships Knott when Knott is precisely what ruins Watt's ability to systematize. Why does Knott ruin it? Because in my reading, rather than representing any one problem expressed by language, Knott represents the main threat to Wittgenstein's system, the problem of expression itself, which is polysemy. If a word can never be reduced to a single meaning, then the system is no longer self-evident, and the possibilities of the name "Knott" themselves cannot be reduced to any one meaning, due to the numerous plays on language available. "Knott" could mean "knot," indicating a puzzle or knot that can be solved or untied, that there is an actual answer, even if that answer is unknown. "Knott" could also mean "naught" nothingness as it exists on its own, a positive quality, however paradoxical, or it could mean "not" indicating the negation of something else, the antithesis of a positive quality. It is not that these particular interpretations are wrong, while others might prove correct, but instead that Mr. Knott represents the impossibility of all interpretative efforts, which explains why throughout this section I have not pushed too far with any one specific interpretation (Katz's Freudian reading, for example). Even if I was to choose what I believe to be the most likely of the three options listed above, that still gets us nowhere according to Wittgenstein, as I will now demonstrate.

Between the choice of "knott" meaning "knot" or "not/naught," a choice between there being an answer and there not being an answer, I think it's clear by now that there is no answer. Choosing then

between “knott” as “naught” or “not,” nothingness as a positive quality that exists on its own, an absolute, or nothingness merely as negation applied to something else, a relative quality, then I would choose the latter option, because the only thing we are ever told about Knott that constitutes actual knowledge is that “except one, not to need, and two, a witness to his not needing, Knott needed nothing, as far as Watt could see ... so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease” (Beckett, *Watt* 166). Since Knott needs to be observed, one could argue that he is “not” rather than “naught,” because he requires something else to negate, and Knott is then the negating action rather than negation itself, relative rather than absolute. The reason why this helps nothing is that to define Knott as the action of negation is to basically make of Knott a syntactical property, a ~ in mathematical terms, and as Wittgenstein has just told us, language cannot express syntactical properties, it can only demonstrate them. Therefore, even if Knott is given the particular meaning of “negating action,” the result is the same as if you merely read Knott as indicating the problem of polysemy, because in either instance nothing meaningful can be said about him. I believe that by this point Beckett must have felt that way about the project of the Western novel as representation in general, because *Watt* carries all attempts at logical representation to their limits, only to show that everything that matters is beyond them, that what is left silent is the subject itself. Having mocked the rational tradition to its terminal point, Beckett would soon turn away from Cartesian representationalism entirely and move the focus of his attack onto what would prove to be his main target: Husserlian phenomenology.

IV. Destroying the Village in Order to Save It: Beckett's *Three Novels* as a Satire of Phenomenology

But it's entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate. – Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

When I last described Beckett's engagement with philosophy, it was 1938 and he had just read

Mauthner's linguistic critique of representationalism, which focuses on the inability of words to link the images represented in the mind with the thing-in-itself. What Beckett read next, Sartre's Master's thesis *The Imagination*, made this problem irrelevant, as it contained Sartre's description of Husserlian phenomenology and its new conception of consciousness as intentionality. *The Imagination* presents Sartre's summaries of other philosophers rather than Sartre's own ideas, so it is Husserl rather than Sartre whom Beckett would have learned about by reading Sartre's work. In the classic Cartesian model, mind and body are separate, and the problem then is how to make the immanent correspond with the transcendent. Instead of answering the problem of the subject/object divide, Husserl dissolves it, or, as Dan Zahavi describes it in *Husserl's Phenomenology*, "rather than saying that we experience representations, one could say that our experiences are presentational" (19). To sum up an intricate argument, Husserl points out that "re-presentation presupposes perception," or an initial presentation, and since the represented object is only possible based upon the object presented in perception, perception is therefore primary, "directed at real objects in the world ... unmediated by any mental representations" (as quoted, Zahavi 19). After doing away with a correspondence theory, Husserl also dissolves the problem of how the subject reaches the object by defining the subject as always intended toward something else, always already a mixture of immanence and transcendence rather than pure immanence as in the Cartesian model. For Husserl, "it is not a problem for the subject to reach the object, since the subject is per se self-transcending" (Zahavi 21). By intentionality, Husserl means that rather than passively receive the inherent meaning of an object, the subject intends it, actively participates in the constitution of the object's sense, and the object "is only an object for us because of our own meaning-giving contribution" (Zahavi 42).

I will detail shortly just how much of phenomenology Beckett would have gotten from Sartre, but it is immediately obvious that if Beckett's method in *Murphy* and *Watt* had been to parodically inhabit the two main routes in Western philosophy used to bridge the gap between subject and object,

God or logic, only to show the failure of these efforts and the irremediable existence of that severance, then Husserl presents a totally different kind of target for parody, since there is no gap between subject and object to overcome. For phenomenology, the danger is not that one will retreat into the realm of pure mind, as in *Murphy*, since there is no such realm, or that the subject will be lost through logic, as in *Watt*, since the subject is inextricable from experience. Instead, the great danger for Husserl is a problem already close to Beckett's heart, one mentioned almost as frequently as Democritus and Geulincx, that of the subjective idealism resulting in solipsism epitomized by George Berkeley's *esse est percipi*. If the object-as-perceived only can be perceived via the bestowal upon it of meaning by the subject, then it's possible to argue that all meaning is subjective, relative and arbitrary, a mere chimera of language. This is the precise problem addressed in the *Three Novels*.

Instead of the visual, phenomenology requires a different notion of the medium of consciousness, and therefore a different method of representing that consciousness.¹⁰ *Murphy* and *Watt* are both delivered from the third-person perspective, so that the action is seen rather than heard, presented visually rather than linguistically. This reliance upon the visual stems from the fact that for Descartes and the rational tradition, consciousness is sight, “the mental gaze,” (Descartes 91) and knowledge is that which is seen with clarity, “the most clear and distinct,” (Descartes 77) while one “consider[s] ... things within [one's] self silently and without words” (Descartes 68). This idea of consciousness as images continued through Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, in which “we picture facts to ourselves,” such pictures are “a model” which is “laid against reality like a measure,” (15) and logic is “not a body of doctrine but a mirror-image of the world” (133). While modernism is well past the

10 This distinction is made most clearly in Emmanuel Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, but to include an exegesis of Levinas' argument would be to distract from the purpose here. In brief, Levinas equates Western rationalism, specifically Heideggerian ontology, to metaphors of knowledge as sight, indicating comprehension, and reducing the object to the seen/known, but phenomenology moves to the recognition of how Otherness overflows comprehension, evidenced by how the Other speaks for their own self, and how that language can never be pinned down to a single reductive meaning, since language is always polyvalent, and therefore ethics is primary over ontology, since the infinity of the Other as language overflows the totality of its reductive comprehension in the vision of the Same.

convention of objective description, as this can only provide a correspondence and not the thing-in-itself, it still predominately uses the third-person perspective. While the modernist focus on subjectivity might indicate the lack of any objective perspective, it still keeps the model of knowledge as sight, as for Proust “style is more a question of vision than of technique,” (Beckett, *Proust* 551) and it actually provides the culmination of those efforts, as *epiphany* itself is a moment of total sight, from the Greek *epiphainein*, “to manifest, display, show off, come suddenly into view.”

Beckett was mocking the modernist epiphanic rather than genuinely attempting to reveal it, but this tradition still set the terms of the early position Beckett was inhabiting only to mock, and that is why both *Murphy* and for the most part *Watt* are written from the third-person perspective, with *Murphy*'s third-person omniscient narrator reflecting its more Cartesian target of ridiculing the efficacy of God-like all-seeing power in a world where there is nothing worth seeing, and the third-person limited narration of *Watt* as indicating how the modern had replaced God with logic, but in doing so had lost the ability to fully know from an exterior position due to logic's inability to foresee all possibilities, always requiring an appenda to accommodate the inevitable appearance of unforeseen possibilities. The metaphor of knowledge as sight is applied to Murphy himself, with Murphy lauded for his “ability to look on, no matter what the spectacle” (Beckett, *Murphy* 54) which symbolizes Murphy's ability to recognize harsh truths that others would look away from. In a letter from the time, Beckett also applies this metaphor to Geulincx, applauding Geulincx's “conviction that the *sub specie aeternitatis* vision is the only excuse for remaining alive” and that Geulincx “does not put out his eyes on that account” (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940* 319). Here Beckett commends in Geulincx a total comprehension that does not retreat from its own terrible vision, and which could be seen as the fulfillment of the modernist method, despite its negativity.

Post-WWII, Beckett spurns that method, and with it any effort at a “*sub specie aeternitatis*” vision, moving from the third-person perspective to the first-person, from English to French, and away

from the modernist epiphanic and its method of revelation toward a method that instead highlighted the inevitable slippages of language that ruin any attempt to capture the particularities of experience. In 1946, back home in Dublin, Beckett has his famous breakthrough standing on a pier, one which determined his subsequent career, realizing that “Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more ... always adding to” and that Beckett's own method would run in the opposite direction, focusing on “impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding” (as quoted, Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 319). Instead of continuing to attempt the impossible, Beckett would deny the possibility of any total comprehension of vision, of knowledge as the revelation of full sight, and instead begin to simply acknowledge the mess of what was in front of him. It was on that day, as Beckett said later, that “Molloy and the others came to [him] ... when [he] became aware of [his] own folly” (as quoted, Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 319). Shortly afterward, in 1949, Beckett gave his most often-quoted definition of his own method in *Three Dialogues* with Georges Duthuit, using the paintings of Bram Van Velde to describe the role of the artist as not to express, but to highlight the impossibility of expression, trapped in the situation “of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint,” but who “in the event paints,” even though “there is nothing to paint and nothing to paint with” (560). Duthuit immediately points out that at least such art is “expressive of the impossibility to express,” (Beckett, *Three Dialogues* 561) but as I've already shown in the section on Democritus, Beckett rejects such logic, in which “everything is doomed to become occasion,” in the belief that “what should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation” (Beckett, *Three Dialogues* 562) between artist and occasion, subject and object, and all an artist can do is “fail as no other dare fail” (Beckett, *Three Dialogues* 563).

Although these quotes from *Three Dialogues* are better known, I believe that Beckett actually gives the clearest explanation of the problem he is addressing in a 1949 letter to Duthuit that also describes Bram Van Velde's work. In this letter, Beckett hails Van Velde's painting because it is “the

first to repudiate relation ... not the relation with this or that ... but the state of being in relation as such, the state of being in front of" (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941 – 1956* 140). Whereas *Murphy* had attempted to escape into the "inside" of pure mind, Van Velde's art carries the extremism of denial even further, as it makes clear that "the break with the outside world entails the break with the inside world" because "what are called outside and inside are one and the same" (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941 – 1956* 140). Beckett recognizes again that such painting fails, that it does make an attempt to reconnect the inside and outside, but it is different because it makes this effort only to highlight "the impossibility of reconnecting" (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941 – 1956* 140). According to Beckett, this effort of the failure to connect is to be embraced, not the results of the effort, because it is "the *gran rifiuto* that interests [him] ... what lies beyond the outside-inside where [Van Velde] does his striving, not the scale of the striving itself" (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941 – 1956* 140).

Throughout both this letter and the *Three Dialogues*, it is clear that, after his revelation in 1946, Beckett had a more radical notion of what was required of the artist, the terms that must be inhabited. As always, Beckett recognizes but refuses the logical necessity of saying that Van Velde "paints the impossibility of painting" and therefore is still in relation to it. Beckett instead claims that Van Velde avoids this trap because rather than being "in front of," Van Velde is "inside," that he "is them, and they are him," meaning that Van Velde is not just refusal, but "refusal and refusal to accept refusal," (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1941 – 1956* 140) the action of refusing rather than the refusal itself, the motion of pushing away rather than what is being pushed. This denial of meaning is consistent with Beckett's earlier views, since he is always satirizing rather than endorsing, but there is something else new here. Why does Beckett, whose whole career up to this point consisted in mocking Western concepts of the mind/body split, now believe that there is no difference between the inside and outside? And why the new emphasis on relationality, the problem of "being in relation" which makes it impossible to reach "what lies beyond the outside-inside"? I believe that the answer lies in Beckett's

aforementioned reading of Sartre's thesis *The Imagination* in 1938, because in phenomenology subjectivity is the exact mixture of the outside-inside described above.

We know that Beckett knew of Husserl's notion of consciousness as an inside-outside, consisting of an immanent noesis or mental action and a transcendent noema or recipient of that mental action, because, as Matthew Feldman has shown, the last two words in Beckett's philosophy journal, taken from Sartre, were the words “noèse” and “noème” (*Falsifying Beckett* 175).¹¹ Before moving on to making my specific argument about how phenomenology can be used to understand the form and progression of the *Three Novels*, I'd like to demonstrate that although Beckett never read Husserl directly, he would have gained more than enough knowledge of phenomenology from *The Imagination* to parody it in the *Three Novels*, and I will do so by quoting from Sartre to provide a brief explication of Husserlian phenomenology itself. Importantly, Sartre does not present his own version of phenomenology, as in the later *Being and Nothingness*, but instead summarizes Husserl's thought as a way of working past the subject-object divide. Since Beckett frequently relied upon such summaries, as in Windelband, I believe that Beckett's lack of direct contact with Husserl's writing does little to damage my argument here.

As Beckett knew from *The Imagination*, phenomenology is “a description of the structures of transcendental consciousness founded on the intuition of the essence of these structures” (Sartre 125). Using the “essential approach” of “the *epochē* ... [or] parenthesizing of the natural attitude,” (Sartre 126) the phenomenologist withholds “the general positing of existence” (Sartre 125) that characterizes that natural attitude. Once all questions of actual existence have been bracketed, the structures of consciousness can be perceived in their apodictic essence, beyond all presuppositions. Husserl's central claim is that “intentionality is the essential structure of all consciousness,” meaning that “every

¹¹ These terms are in French, since Beckett read them in French, but I will use the English equivalents hereafter, “noesis” and “noema.”

consciousness is consciousness of something,” (Sartre 129) with the emphasis on the *of*. Phenomena are produced by the subject but also are not mere subjective productions, presented to us with an ideal “noematic sense that belongs to each real consciousness [but] is not itself anything real” (Sartre 137). A consciousness never perceives the *hyle* of pure sound, but only sounds with a particular meaning already attached, such as doors slamming, car alarms, rain-drops hitting the window. Each mental act, each noesis, always has an intended object, a noema, such as thinking-action/thought, perceiving-action/object-of-perception, etc., but “the object of consciousness ... is in principle outside of consciousness” (Sartre 130) and transcends that consciousness. The noetic act is *reell*, an actual part of *Erlebnis* or lived experience, but the noema, the intended sense I perceive in the world, is *irreel*, “a nothingness that has only an ideal existence” (Sartre 137). As both Beckett and Derrida realize, this means that each particular is only grasped through its ideal identity, and therefore never fully grasped in its this-ness or haecceity.

Due to Husserl's bracketing of reality, imaginary objects can serve equally well as real objects when it comes to descriptions of the essence of perception. Phenomenology requires the lived experience of a particular example, “but it matters little [whether] the individual fact that serves as a support for the essence is real or imaginary” (Sartre 126). Perception, where one is always in front of something, seeing it in profiles, consists of “a purely passive synthesis” (140) in which the adumbrations or individual slices of sense impressions are synthesized into a flow of experience and given an ideal or noematic sense through the transcendental mode of consciousness. This transcendence stems from the fact that pure consciousness is a precondition for experience rather than part of that experience, as transcendental consciousness is what experiences and can therefore never be experienced, like an eye that sees but cannot see itself. As I've already said, the problem for phenomenology, one which Husserl continuously denies, is that one might argue that since the subject intends the world, there is no true transcendence, only Berkeleyian solipsism. Sartre makes this point as

well, stating that Husserl is “fighting the errors of a certain immanentism that wants to constitute the world from contents of consciousness (for example the idealism of Berkeley)” (130). Overall, it should now be clear that Beckett had enough knowledge of phenomenology to parody it, and that he also had a motive, given his fascination with Berkeley. This is not to say that Beckett was a subjective idealist like Berkeley, but rather that Beckett found in Berkeley a particularly spectacular example of the self-defeating problems found in philosophy, and he would be unwilling to let Husserl claim to solve it, although Beckett fails to offer any solution himself.

Finally, before turning to the general affinities between phenomenology and the *Three Novels* and then a specific examination of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, I'd like to more fully delineate the problem I am addressing. As with the Bible, the worst interpretations for the *Three Novels* are those which attempt to take everything literally.¹² In this reading, the speaker in the *Three Novels* is the same throughout, beginning when a man named Moran is assigned the task of finding a mysterious figure named Molloy. In the process of that search, Moran begins to hallucinate that he himself is Molloy. He then finds himself placed in a room and begins to write of his experiences. As he progresses (or regresses) toward death, he forgets his past names and calls himself Malone. Upon death, he becomes an unnamable figure trapped in purgatory like Dante's Belacqua, awaiting the final judgment which will allow his interminable monologue to finally cease. The flaw with this interpretation is not that it explains too little, but that it explains too much. The fit is too easy. Beckett himself resisted efforts to overtly emphasize the unity of the *Three Novels*, preferring the term “3 in 1” to “trilogy,” as evidenced by Beckett's 1958 response to publisher John Calder's request to use the term “trilogy” on the cover: “Not 'trilogy,' I beseech you, just the three titles and nothing else” (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1957 – 1967* 191). Aside from Beckett's intentions, the potential unity provided by a single

12 Michael Robinson's *The Long Sonata of the Dead* is a particularly egregious example of an attempt to read all of these five novels as happening to the same character.

main character is also denied frequently within the texts themselves, as the various narrators refer to each “M” character as an individual separate from their self, as when the narrator of *The Unnamable*, who sees Malone as a separate figure oscillating in front of him, claims that “all these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones do not fool me” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 297).

While I find it unrewarding to claim a single narrator throughout these novels, there is still an undeniable linear movement that unfolds throughout them, a disintegrative process that begins with *Molloy* and shudders to a halt in *The Unnamable*. Although Beckett seems uncomfortable with the unity indicated by the term “trilogy,” he was by no means unhappy with the three novels being printed together, writing to a friend in 1958 that he was “very pleased to have the 3 between the same boards at last” (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1957 – 1967* 252). Again, Beckett's intentions are as unnecessary here to claim a similarity between narrators as they were in claiming a difference between narrators, because the texts themselves repeatedly demonstrate the numerous affinities between the characters and their situations. There is a definite progression that links the *Three Novels*, requiring that they be read in their specific order to gain the full effect, an effect which would be lost if for example one began with *Malone Dies*, then read *The Unnamable*, then ended with *Molloy*. But if these novels are not linked by a single narrator, then what exactly is the connection? What process binds them together, however loosely? To fulfill my requirements, any such process would need to allow for Molloy and Moran as existing simultaneously, not require the presence of a single narrator, and hopefully provide some interpretation for the increasing chaos of *The Unnamable*.

I believe that the best way to understand the progression of the *Three Novels* is to view them as enacting the phenomenological method only to illustrate that method's failure, making the novels a *reduction ad absurdum* against Husserlian phenomenology. Although Husserl presents notorious difficulties, I will follow Husserl authority Dermot Moran in defining this method as consisting of three main steps, beginning with the bracketing motion of the *epochē*, a “putting into parentheses” of

existence, paired with the simultaneous reduction to the givenness of phenomena within that bracketed consciousness, which then uses eidetic variation to move from the particular instance to the universal through “the employment of imaginative variation” and ends with the “transcendental reduction” to pure consciousness, which is “the move to understand all objectivities as achievements or productions of transcendental subjectivity” (*The Husserl Dictionary* 108). Since Husserl often fails to provide strict descriptions of method, focusing instead on the intended results of those methods, I draw from his disciple Eugen Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* to describe the double motion of the *epochē*, pairing the bracketing of the world with Moran and the reduction to givenness with Molloy. Next, I quote from Husserl's *Ideas I* to show how Malone attempts and fails to enact eidetic variation through the stories of stand-in figures Sapo and Macmann. Finally, I claim that *The Unnamable* bears a strong resemblance to “the (in)famous paragraph 49 of Ideas I” where Husserl contends that “it is possible to imagine the existence of a worldless subject, [but] it is not possible to imagine the existence of a subjectless world” (Zahavi 47). Husserl uses this experiment to argue that “the subject, the immanence, is absolute and autonomous since its manifestation only depends upon itself,” (Zahavi 48) but Beckett in *The Unnamable* shows that this proposed autonomy is a lie, since the subject must depend upon language to speak itself. Having broached the question of language, I argue that, at the same time the “progress” of the *Three Novels* corresponds to the phenomenological reductions, the failure of that progress corresponds to the movement of Derrida's initial critiques of Husserl, in which, as described by Leonard Lawlor in *Derrida and Husserl*, “the problem of the sign” comes to replace the “the problem of genesis,” (166) because the *Three Novels* follow a similar route, with *Molloy* highlighting the problem of origin and *The Unnamable* revealing the problem of language or the alterity of signs. To end this section, I argue that while Derrida accepts relationality and merely argues for reversing the current value system, Beckett's more radical goal is to break from that relationship entirely.

Before moving on, I'd like to describe how intentional I believe Beckett's satire in the *Three*

Novels of phenomenology was, and if he would have known enough of phenomenology from Sartre in order to satirize it. Beckett had read Descartes and I believe that he intentionally satirizes Occasionalism in *Murphy*. Beckett then extended Descartes's rational impulse to its limits in *Watt*, and since Wittgenstein does the same, *Watt* can be read through Wittgenstein without Beckett being familiar with the *Tractatus*. With Husserl, I would describe Beckett's satire as both intentional and intuitive. Beckett had enough of the basics of phenomenology from Sartre to intentionally target Husserl, and from there he intuited the rest. Sartre describes the initial step in phenomenology as a suspension of judgment that simultaneously reduces experience to its essential features, and phenomenology in general is conceived of by Sartre as the search for the ultimate transcendent essence of consciousness. Beckett was a genius for intuiting the problems of various philosophical system when he only had a summary knowledge of their basic tenets, and my argument is that he intentionally used the basics of phenomenology as given to him by Sartre to provide the target of his *Three Novels*, then intuited the problems of that system on his own while satirizing it. Most usefully, my reading of the *Three Novels* as a satire of phenomenology offers an explanation as to why there are so many noted congruencies between Beckett's thought and post-structuralism. Authors like Daniel Katz in *Saying I No More* and Thomas Trezise in *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* begin their books by arguing that Beckett cannot be understood as a phenomenologist, but then argue that Beckett somehow embodies post-structural critiques of phenomenology. Both rely upon a vague notion of "textuality" to account for this correspondence, but I find such an argument unsatisfactory, and Derrida himself refuses to clarify whether or not this congruency can be explained by the fact that Beckett was a direct influence on him, with Derrida deferring the question of his parallels with Beckett by saying only that "this is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close ... I have perhaps avoided him a bit because of this identification" (as quoted, Katz, *Saying I No More* 5). My reading of Beckett as a satirist of phenomenology doesn't require that Beckett actually

believed in phenomenology as any sort of answer to cleaning up the mess, but it also provides a more realistic explanation for the many resemblances between *The Unnamable* and Derrida, since in my reading both intentionally critique phenomenology for its overlooking of the instability of language, rather than both somehow just ending up in the same place without explanation.

A. General Affinities

The subject doesn't matter, there is none. – Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

Murphy's Cartesian mind was described in visual terms, a mixture of light and dark, but the medium for consciousness is language rather than images in the *Three Novels*, as Molloy says early on, claiming that his “sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness hard to penetrate” and that all he knows “is what the words know” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 27). For that reason, we see Murphy and Watt, but only hear Molloy and the rest, and these figures speak from the *I* position. *Murphy* and *Watt* also contain visual references, Shandy-esque “typographical screams” (Beckett, *Murphy* 141) like the use of a ? to indicate the unknown in *Watt*, but these visual cues disappear in the *Three Novels*. This switch from the visual to the aural resulting in the move from the third-person to first-person perspective is key to my argument that Beckett was parodically inhabiting phenomenology in the *Three Novels*, because phenomenology rejects the abstract to describe lived experience, always starting, as already mentioned, “from the I” (Husserl 57). Another important reason why phenomenology rather than Descartes provides the best philosophical lens through which to examine these novels is that although the speakers all reject the possibility of any comprehensive understanding, as “for the whole there seems to be no spell,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 23) they don't seem to doubt that they are actually experiencing what they experience. While impossible events increasingly occur, the texts never hint at the possibility of a Cartesian-style deceiver God, but instead force the reader to simply accept events as described, as do the speakers themselves. This tendency of the speakers to accept the givenness of their

experience, to withhold judgment and accept what is intuitively present rather than actively doubt that presence, according to Husserl in *Ideas I*, Section 32, is the defining difference between his method and that of his precursor Descartes. No matter the absurdity of what they experience, the narrators rely on their basic intuition to assure themselves of the givenness of that experience, such as when Malone refuses to conclude that he is “prey to hallucinations” and in fact dead, because his “horse-sense tells [him] that [he] has not ceased to gasp” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 213). Each narrator, despite the chaos of their descriptions, also displays a predilection for final inventories and lists of laughably pedantic questions, aspiring to proceed in a formal manner similar to Husserl, with Moran distinguishing himself from the uncouth via his ability to “listen to the falsetto of reason,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 102) Molloy claiming to see the world “in a way inordinately formal,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 45) Malone describing himself as “scrupulous to the last, finical to a fault,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 227) and the Unnamable finally realizing the futility of such formality and declaring that “what prevents the miracle is the spirit of method to which I have perhaps been a little too addicted” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 297).

Finally, while I would agree with Feldman's aforementioned claim that Beckett began to “write phenomenologically” in *Watt*, I believe that this can be demonstrated much more clearly in the *Three Novels*. What does it mean to write phenomenologically? In normal acts of perception, one only perceives discrete aspects or adumbrations of an object, and “the thing itself is never seen but appears across the endless series of [its] appearances” (Husserl 37). Those adumbrations are then synthesized together through the ideality of the noema to produce the intended object, as “it is through synthesis that conscious experiences connect together into a unity ... when an identical object is grasped in the manifold of appearances” (Moran 313). Rather than focusing on that typical experience of synthesis which, as it functions properly, does not reveal the underlying means by which consciousness

constitutes the world with meaning, Sartre in *Nausea*¹³ and Beckett in *Watt* and the *Three Novels* both focus on moments when that synthesis breaks down, leaving only the pure *hyle* of sense perception without an intended sense. Feldman claims this first occurs in *Watt*, using an example from Arsene's early monologue, but in my opinion this appearance is still embryonic, because, unlike later in the *Three Novels*, the rendering of the breakdown of the noema is not described directly from the first-person perspective, and it uses a visual metaphor rather than aural. Given the importance placed on the moment in Arsene's monologue cited by Feldman in *Watt*, I will quote excerpts of it at length:

The change. In what did it consist? It is hard to say. Something slipped ... There I was warm and bright, smoking my tobacco-pipe, watching the warm bright wall, when suddenly somewhere some little thing slipped, some little tiny thing ...

To conclude from this that the incident was internal would, I think, be rash. For my – how shall I say – my personal system was so distended at the period of which I speak that the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw. Everything that happened happened inside it, and at the same time everything that happened happened outside it ...

The sun on the wall, since I was looking at the sun on the wall at the time, underwent an instantaneous and I venture to say radical change of appearance. It was the same sun and the same wall ... but so changed that I felt I had been transported, without my having remarked it, to some quite different yard, and to some quite different season, in an unfamiliar country. At the same time my tobacco-pipe, since I was not eating a banana, ceased so completely from the solace to which I was inured, that I took it from my mouth ... And my breast, in which I could almost feel the feathers stirring, in the charming way breast feathers have, relapsed into the void and bony concavity which my dear tutor used to say reminded him of Crecy ...

It was then in my distress that I had the baseness to call to my aid recent costiveness and want of stomach. But in what did the change *consist*? What was changed, and how? What was changed, if my information was correct, was the sentiment that a change, other than a change of degree, had taken place. What was changed was existence off the ladder ...

But how did this sentiment arise, that a change other than a change of degree had taken place? And to what reality did it correspond? ... I shall merely state, without enquiring how it came, or how it went, that in my opinion it was not an illusion, as long as it lasted, that presence of what did not exist, that presence

¹³ Beckett read *Nausea* before reading *The Imagination*.

without, that presence within, that presence between, though I'll be buggered if I can understand how it could have been anything else. (Beckett, *Watt* 43-46)

For Arsene, the change is indescribable because nothing external has changed, only Arsene's changing intention. I would argue that this reflects the bracketing gesture of the *epochē*, as only one's attention to experience changes in the bracketing while the experience itself stays the same. However, while the monologue is spoken from Arsene's *I* position, it is being reported to us from the distance of the third-person perspective, since Sam has yet to intrude upon the narrative, and the metaphor here is still visual, indicating that images might be the medium of consciousness rather than language. For these reasons, while I agree with Feldman that Beckett began writing phenomenologically in *Watt*, I believe this technique only reaches maturity in the *Three Novels*. Also, this is the only example found in *Watt* that describes this breakdown, and those examples are much more frequent in the *Three Novels*.

As soon as Beckett begins writing in French, the metaphor turns from the visual to the aural, the disintegration of language rather than images, and since in the *Three Novels*¹⁴ consciousness is language, the breakdown of the noema, the bursting through of the senseless particular free of any ideal meaning, is much more drastic than in *Watt*. Moran, after being assigned the Molloy affair, describes “the noise of things bursting, merging, avoiding one another,” and as the typical synthesis of consciousness breaks down, he begins to “drown in the spray of phenomena” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 106). Molloy's efforts at communication also fail due to the sensitivity of his ear, which turns words into “pure sounds, free of all meaning” and makes his own words resemble the inchoate “buzzing of an insect” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 45). Since the inside and outside are now linked, the inability to define the outside with words also indicates the inability of each speaker to define the interiority of their specific self, leading to a loss of identity. This breakdown is furthered by Malone, who claims that “the

¹⁴ *Watt* is concerned with language, but language is not said to be consciousness in *Watt*. As I've argued, there basically is no consciousness for any of the characters in *Watt*.

noises of the world, so various in themselves ... had been dinning at [him] so long as gradually to have merged into a single noise” which takes the form of “one vast continuous buzzing” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 201). By the time Worm arrives in *The Unnamable*, powerless to prevent the acts of perceiving which are forcing him to be, Worm's ear is reduced to “a transformer in which sound is turned, without the help of reason, to rage and terror” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 343). Lacking all identity, any subjectivity by which to project meaning, Worm can only receive meaning from the outside, but that reception from the outside gradually forces Worm to possess the attendant inside, trapped in relation to it. Having covered these broad congruencies, I would now like to turn to an examination of each specific novel.

B. *Molloy* and the Simultaneity of the Bracketing *Epochē* and Phenomenological Reduction

Yes it sometimes happens and will sometimes happen again that I forget who I am and strut before my eyes, like a stranger. Then I see the sky different from what it is and the earth too takes on false colors. It likes like rest, it is not ... – Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*

Key to my application of the phenomenological process to Beckett's *Three Novels* is that the initial step in that process consists of two simultaneous motions, which allows for the co-existence of Molloy and Moran. While in his later work Husserl does begin to “distinguish between *epochē* and reduction,” (Moran, *The Husserl Dictionary* 108) that distinction finds its fullest form in Eugen Fink's *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, which Fink wrote under the influence of and in direct dialogue with Edmund Husserl, who provides his stamp of approval in the introduction and several footnotes. Fink defines the “double action of the phenomenological reduction” (29) as consisting of “two basic internal moments ... [the] transcendental *epochē* and reduction proper” (48). Those two simultaneous moments, the *epochē* and the reduction itself, are described by Ronald Bruzina in *Edmund Husserl and Eugen Fink* as

1. the abstention from belief applied to the whole of consciousness in the world to which reflection turns ... and 2. the recognition of the constitutedness of self-conceptions about human being in the world as that *through and beyond which* one has to grasp in its own proper terms the transcendental subjectivity that is responsible for constitutive action and its constituted results. (100)

Fink describes these two movements as internal to a single moment to avoid the problematic nature of any initial motivation for that movement, a problem he describes as “phenomenological foreknowing” (34). Put simply, the problem is that a subject cannot perceive that phenomena are produced subjectively in consciousness until they have performed the withholding of judgment that defines the *epochē*, but until they perform the *epochē*, they have no way of recognizing that essential givenness of phenomena, of knowing there is anything to bracket. In performing this double motion and escaping from all presuppositions, the phenomenologist departs from “the horizon of human possibilities” and then the “transcendental subjectivity, concealed in the self-objectivation as man, reflectively thinks about itself ... annulling itself as man” (Fink 32). The reduction “lays bare the transcendental onlooker,” who is “freed of the shrouding cover of the human being,” (Fink 40) a process by which “man un-humanizes himself” (Bruzina 100).

Before receiving the Molloy assignment, Jacques Moran epitomizes the blind acceptance of the natural attitude. A man known chiefly by the rigidity of his “Sunday habits,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 92) Moran's supercilious faith confines itself to issues of etiquette, such as whether it is proper to take communion after drinking beer. His relationship with his son consists solely in efforts to increase the bourgeoisie “horror of the body and its functions,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 113) and his lone source of pleasure stems from caring for his hens and bees. The requirements of his job, which are left vague but hint at his participation in a network of espionage directed at incomprehensible targets, bring Moran the assignment to find Molloy, although the purpose of this assignment remains unknown. Once the messenger Gaber informs Moran of the task at hand and the existence of Molloy, whom I will soon link

to the reduction to givenness, Moran enacts the bracketing of the *epochē*, slowly letting go of all that holds him to the world. The knowledge of Molloy is described by Moran as “the poison I had just been given,” and as a result of that poison “the color and weight of the world were changing already,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 92) a process which results in “a great confusion” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 93). The presence of Molloy punctures Moran's shallow acceptance of the world, and it is as if his life begins running out, though he does not immediately know “through what breach” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 97).

That knowledge of the subjective production of phenomena underlying existence only comes to Moran after his son abandons him during the failed search for Molloy, in the form of a voice that Moran says is “within me and exhorts me to continue to the end,” despite the fact that “it is a rather ambiguous voice and not always easy to follow” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 126). As Moran proceeds through the bracketing, however, that voice, the voice of the phenomenological other, becomes more distinct. As Husserl describes it in *Ideas I*, the *epochē* requires the suspension of “every kind of cultural form, works of the technical and fine arts, of the sciences, and aesthetic and practical values,” and the same holds true for “the state, customs, law, religion” (104). Moran, stranded in the forest, receives a summons from Gaber to return home and make a report, and by the time Moran does so, enthralled to the voice of the other within himself, he has become unrecognizable, undergone “a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected [him] from what [he] was always condemned to be” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 142). Despite that change, Moran has “a sharper and clearer sense of [his] identity than ever before,” (Beckett *Three Novels* 164) but he can no longer adopt the natural attitude, “no longer be bothered with the wretched trifles which had once been [his] delight” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 155). Moran accepts without emotion that in his absence his son has returned, his hens are dead and his bees are nothing but “a little dust of annulets and wings” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 169). Despite his previous delight in “the frivolous and charming world” (Beckett *Three Novels* 161) of religion,

Moran sends the priest away without speaking to him, sells his possessions and resolves to abandon his past life forever, a decision dictated to him by the voice of the phenomenological other, whose voice Moran now understands as having always been beneath his own, and which orders him to write the report that makes up the text at hand.

As most of the Moran section details the *epochē* and then ends with the emergence of the phenomenological onlooker, the Molloy section begins with a brief nod to that bracketed world, with Molloy claiming that he is living in his mother's room and that the person or people looking after him have asked him to write out his story, before focusing solely on the other emerging from within himself. As described by Fink, the phenomenological onlooker “does not stop exercising a belief in the world because he has never lived in belief in the world to begin with,” and he is characterized most by “the action of not joining in with, of not participating in world-belief” (42). Since Molloy as the phenomenological onlooker produces his own experience, his “region is vast,” he “has never left [its region] and ... never shall” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 60) because Molloy intends his world, projecting that region before himself, and can therefore never travel outside its bounds. Molloy frequently describes his otherness, his role as “a mere spectator,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 32) as resulting from a preference for the depths, saying that “they are deep, my sorts, a deep ditch, and I am not often out of them” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 15). When confronted with society, Molloy's alterity shows how fully he has bracketed the social world, preventing him from adhering to even the most basic standards, as when a policeman asks Molloy for identification and Molloy presents him with the papers he uses to wipe himself. After being arrested, the resulting disturbance causes a distortion of Molloy's perception, with lawyers and policeman described as making “a dark, dark forms crowding in a dark place,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 19) but Molloy's otherness proves to be his saving grace as “to apply the letter of the law to a creature like [Molloy] is not an easy matter” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 20). Ultimately Molloy withholds all judgment of the society that rejects him, believing that it was he “who was not natural

enough to enter into the order of things and appreciate its niceties,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 39) and makes his way into the forest. While there, he undergoes an experience that bears a strong resemblance to the phenomenological reduction.

Left to his own devices, Molloy hears “the voice ... of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world” where he encounters “the indestructible chaos of timeless things” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 35). During this process, Molloy, having bracketed the world, reduces experience to the unchanging truth of essence, but his depiction of that essence is the exact opposite of that proposed by Husserl. Again, as with Descartes, the results are not just different than Husserl, they employ his method but end up with results 180 degrees away from what Husserl believes, indicating that there has to be an intentional reference in order for there to be such a perfect inversion. Rather than eternal truth or the stable bedrock of the self-evident, Molloy is told of “these wastes where true light never was, nor any upright thing, nor any true foundation” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 35). Molloy fears this voice but is powerless to stop it, describing it as “not a sound like other sounds, that you listen to when you choose,” but it is instead “with your head you hear it, not in your ears, you can't stop it” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 35). After listening to the voice of essence, a voice which Molloy perceives not as eternal truth but sinister chaos, Molloy says that he will sometimes forget who he is and “strut before his eyes like a stranger” and during that experience of total dissolution into the otherness of the ever-present onlooker he sees “the sky different from what it is and the earth too takes on false colors” a falsity that “looks like rest, [but] it is not” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 37). Here too the phenomenological reduction is satirized through the inversion of its results, as what looks like rest, resembling the surety of Husserlian apodictic certainty, is described as the most false, causing horror instead of certainty, which is the exact opposite of Husserl’s intended result. Lacking any escape route, sealed up in the jar of his otherness, Molloy can only ask himself “questions, one after the other, just for the sake of looking,” a process he calls “thinking,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 44) and which prefigures the play of Malone.

C. *Malone Dies* as the Failure of Eidetic Variation

Thus, if one loves paradoxical talk, one can actually say – and if one properly understands the ambiguous sense involved, one can say in strict truth – that “fiction” makes up the vital element of phenomenology. – Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, Section 70

Having bracketed all questions of existence and reduced that existence to the givenness of phenomena, eidetic variation is then employed to move beyond the fact that “individual being of every kind is ... contingent” and could “in keeping with its essence be otherwise” (Husserl 10). As Dermot Moran describes this process, one “seeks to alter the constituent parts of the object ... [and] the essential features are those which cannot be varied” (*The Husserl Dictionary* 160). By placing “before its eyes pure occurrences of consciousness as exemplars,” (Husserl 119) eidetic variation then uses the imagination, the fiction spoken of by Husserl at the start of this section, to bring forth the unchangeable essence of that exemplar, “moving from the individual instance to the viewing of essence” (Moran, *The Husserl Dictionary* 160). In the same sense in which Husserl speaks of eidetic variation as “fiction,” Malone describes his own activity as “a game” that he plays, telling himself stories that are “neither beautiful nor ugly ... [but] calm ... almost lifeless” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 174). Espousing a desire for clarity, Malone wants “as little as possible of darkness” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 184). With the real world having receded further, Malone has no past, no identity, claiming only that his room seems to be his because he finds himself in it, but that the events of his previous life “have left no discernible trace on [his] mind” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 177). Realizing despite that lack of memory that he has “tried to live without knowing what [he] was trying,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 189) Malone tells himself stories of a surrogate figure in an effort to pierce through the myriad forms “in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 192) and find the apodictic essence of himself. At times Malone denies that this figure, first called Sapo and then later Macmann, represents himself, such as when Malone claims that all he wants now “is to make a last effort to understand ... how such

creatures are possible,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 193) but ultimately he recognizes that it is “a little creature in [his] image” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 219).

In the spirit of eidetic variation, Malone constantly changes the circumstances or attributes of Sapo/Macmann in a search for the essentials of both their existence and his own. Since no non-contingent or essential attribute of being is found during that process, it can be summarized rather than detailed exhaustively. At first Sapo is described in context of his family life, in which his parents pin their vain hopes on Sapo's scholastic achievements, which are nonexistent, but Sapo flees from his inadequacy, indicating that family and the intellect are not essential attributes of himself. Sapo is next found in the country house of the butcher Big Lambert, but this change of domestic scene still leaves Sapo isolated, and he soon leaves human society entirely, preferring instead to crawl through the forest in a style reminiscent of Molloy and Moran. Malone then finds Sapo resting on a bench but with a much changed appearance, so Malone renames the figure Macmann, changes his name without any resulting effect. Showing that even sanity itself is inessential, Macmann is found next in a mental institution. Macmann briefly encounters love through his caretaker Moll, but she soon dies, replaced by the violent and erratic Lemuel, who fails to offer even the basics of companionship, leaving Macmann a solitary figure, devoid of love or friendship, who lacks any central feature upon which to base a solid definition of his ever-changing self.

Concurrent to Sapo becoming more like Malone, requiring the change into Macmann, Malone too undergoes this sifting process of eidetic variation in which parts of the self are removed, describing the feeling of “a blind and tired hand delving feebly in [his] particles and letting them trickle between its fingers,” and how this hand, angry at its ultimate inability to conjure a decisive gesture or find Malone's defining feature, “clutches, ransacks, ravages, avenging its failure to scatter [him] with one sweep” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 218). Near the end of the novel, Malone despairs of his efforts and describes how Macmann and the other mental patients, who resemble Murphy, Molloy and the rest of

the narrators of Beckett's early fiction, are led on a daytrip to an island by Lemuel and a supercilious woman named Lady Pedal. Once there Lemuel provides the elements for a destructively literal version of eidetic variation by chopping several of the inmates into pieces, never to be put back together. Having grown almost indistinguishable from Macmann, Malone himself ends by disappearing into his own story. Despite seeking to find the truth or essence of existence, he is instead left with only a "tangle of grey bodies," (Beckett, *Three Novels* 280) abandoned to float with them forever in a ship of fools. All that is then left is to take the final step described in Malone's last lines, venturing to where there is "never anything there anymore," (Beckett, *Three Novels* 281) to that presence beyond which there is nothing, the ultimate source of transcendental consciousness itself.

D. "That there is no longer a world": *The Unnamable* and *Ideas I* Section 49

The entire spatiotemporal world is ... a merely intentional being. It is a being that consciousness posits in its experiences ... but *beyond this* is a nothing. — Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, Section 49, "Absolute Consciousness as the Residue of Completely Nullifying the World"

In Section 49 of *Ideas I*, entitled "Absolute consciousness as the residue of completely nullifying the world," Husserl proposes that "the being of consciousness ... would necessarily be modified, to be sure, by nullifying the world of things, but would not be affected in its own existence" (89). Husserl admits that such an experience would be "teeming with irresolvable conflicts," having lost "the fixed, regular order," but the immanence of consciousness undeniably survives this strange situation in which "there is no longer a world," (88) proving that world to be "utterly dependent upon consciousness," (89) and that consciousness to be "absolute and independent of all being" (Moran, *The Husserl Dictionary* 41). Since consciousness is the means by which experience occurs, consciousness itself, "considered in purity, has to hold as a connection of being that is, for itself, closed off," and the "phenomenological residue" (Husserl 90) of transcendental consciousness survives all reduction. As the mode of experience, the precondition that makes experience possible, the ego can never experience

itself in the present. The search for any experience not constituted by an experiencing ego is doomed to fail, the hope for any “*beyond this*” reduced to “a nothing” (Husserl 90).

While there is no evidence of Beckett reading Section 49 of *Ideas I*, *The Unnamable* is eerily similar to Husserl's thought experiment, as both imagine an attempt to reach ultimate consciousness by subtracting the physical world, even as both acknowledge the impossibility of their efforts. If Husserl's process had been working successfully throughout the course of the novels, this comparison of *The Unnamable* to *Ideas I*, Section 49 would be wholly adequate to explain the chaos of *The Unnamable*. After all, as quoted above, Husserl admits that this nullified world would result in an experience “teeming in irresolvable conflicts,” and the Unnamable certainly encounters such conflicts, forced to proceed “by *aporia* pure and simple” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 285). However, the comparison between Beckett's *Three Novels* and phenomenology breaks down here because the chaos described is not the chaos of the perceived world (although that world is chaotic, full of oscillating figures and detached voices), but instead the chaos of the perceiving self, which, though “unbelieving,” must still call itself “I,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 285) and due to that lack of belief can no longer maintain the fiction of a pure, coherent presence, a presence that forms the basis for Husserl's entire method, one which for him is absolutely unquestionable. In Husserl's notion, the *I* might be “indescribable”, (154) but it is fully itself, with no exterior presence involved. As *The Unnamable* proceeds, however, it becomes clear that language, the medium of consciousness, introduces into the subject that very exteriority which Husserl denies, since it is inextricable from consciousness, the means by which presence both states itself and makes itself known to itself. As its speech proceeds, the Unnamable describes itself not only as an *I*, but also a *you* and a *he*, and that slippage across pronouns indicates a division within self-presence for which Husserl cannot account. To describe the chaos of that self, a chaos stemming from its constitution through the shifting medium of language, a chaos that eliminates any possibility of phenomenology finding the apodictic essence sought, I will now turn to Derrida's critique of Husserl in

Voice and Phenomenon.

E. Derrida and Beckett: The Problem of Origin and the Alterity of Signs

Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? – Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

The reason why the essence of consciousness can never be reached in *The Unnamable* is that it can never be expressed through language, and this focus on the inability of language to express essence is shared by Derrida, which makes it necessary to briefly summarize Derrida's early philosophy before exploring the similarities and differences between Derrida's position and Beckett's, with the main difference being that although Derrida claims that relationality makes absolute meaning impossible, Derrida also accepts the resulting impurity of meaning, while Beckett, as shown in the letter to Duthuit, wants to do away with relationality entirely. In his 1953/54 philosophical dissertation *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*, Derrida takes up the problem described by Fink as phenomenological foreknowing, which is that phenomenology, designed to be free of all suppositions, actually supposes itself. Since the noema is *irreell*, its “constituting is always preceded by a constituted,” (Lawlor 81) it is therefore impossible to “eliminate the already constituted” (Lawlor 47) and determine the origin of that constituted sense, to disentangle *morphe* from *hyle*, interior from exterior, etc., as Husserl mistakenly believes, because “all oppositions necessarily contaminate each other” (Lawlor 88). I believe this to be an accurate criticism of Husserl, and one that can be applied to *Ideas I* Section 49 when Husserl claims the primacy of transcendental consciousness over the world, an opposition that in theory involves two separate terms, but Husserl admits beforehand that these terms are in experience always intertwined, so his thought experiment falls prey to the very metaphysics he attempts to avoid, since metaphysics is “speculation without evidence or intuition” (Lawlor 82). Having detailed Husserl's problems with origin, Derrida in *Voice and Phenomenon* moves onto the cause of that problem: that the medium of the always-already-constituted noematic sense, the medium of consciousness itself, language, auto-

affection, the voice, can never have a pure beginning or attain full presence in the originally repetitive realm of signs.

For Husserl in *Ideas I*, under the influence of Frege, the essence of language is logical expression, and “univocal terms [are] needed for essence ... words fitted with distinct and singular meanings” (120). In Husserl's conception of language, any intended sense, any *Bedeutung*, can be understood free from context due to its logical connection with the expressed sense. Husserl realizes that all instances of actual communication require some loss or distortion of that meaning, so he distinguishes between two forms of language use, between indication and expression, and claims that in the interior monologue of auto-affection, the intended meaning is always completely present, perfectly expressed rather than imperfectly indicated. Indication is “the need for signs,” (Derrida 36) but for Husserl those signs attain transparency in interior expression because “the certainty of internal existence has no need ... of being signified” as it is “immediately present” (Derrida 37). This immediate presence of meaning in interior consciousness, the lack of alterity or otherness, allows Husserl to claim that indication has no role in auto-affection, that *voice* as consciousness is a medium of pure expression.

However in Derrida's conception of language, which stems from Ferdinand de Saussure rather than Gottlob Frege, terms are presented negatively rather than positively. As de Saussure says of the self-enclosed linguistic system, “there are only differences without positive terms” (*Course in General Linguistics* 120). Rather than being able to distinguish the value of positive terms without reference to each other, x and y , signs in de Saussure's conception only present meaning negatively, x can only be understood as $-(y)$, and rather than the immediate presence of $x=y$, there is only the substituted non-presence of $-(x)=- (y)$, so that the actual terms never appear. Furthermore, the constituting of presence through signs requires that this presence can never be a singular event, can only indicate the already known, as “a sign that would take place only once would not be a sign” (Derrida 42). Derrida then uses

the “originarily repetitive structure” of the sign to demonstrate that language itself introduces alterity and otherness into the sameness of auto-affection, declaring as a result that “there is no sure criterion by means of which to distinguish between an external and internal language” (Derrida 48). There is always a trace of indication, of alterity, in each present expression, which means that the particular can never be reached. Consciousness is language, language is alterity, and consciousness therefore can never be wholly identical to itself, is always re-presented but never presented, resulting in “the identity of identity and non-identity within the same” (Derrida 59).

Derrida then argues that since alterity is the precondition for sameness and the supplementarity of the trace precedes all constituted meaning, the governing force of meaning in language is *differance*, “the operation of differing that, at once, splits and delays presence” (Derrida 75). As we have seen through de Saussure, presence in language is always delayed, and due to Husserl's conception of time as including the non-perception of retention, self-presence is always different from itself. For Husserl, there is no discrete, punctual now. Instead each *now*, each simultaneity includes the *just-ahead* of protention and the *just-past* of retention. The diaphaneity of signs in Husserlian expression requires that meaning be instantly available, perceived in the blink of an eye. Yet, as should be obvious, once Husserl conceives of the now as a duration, as including the thickness of retention and protention, such immediacy becomes impossible; “there is a duration to the blink ... and it closes the eye” (Derrida 56). To appear to itself, presence must first always be different from itself, “differentiated into receiver and creator, hearer and speaker,” (Lawlor 194) and “the same is the same only by affecting itself with an other, by becoming the other of the same” (Derrida 73). The *I* can never realize itself in the present, but only by grasping itself as a *you*. Since any consciousness of that *you* can only be realized through the repetition of anterior signs, through language, voice can never provide a medium for the simultaneous, univocal expression of essence, and as a result “we are beyond absolute knowledge” (Derrida 88). Even the experience of silence itself is kept by the voice, must be translated into signs in order to be

consciously perceived, and the voice, the medium for naming, is itself “the unnamable” (Derrida 66).

Using these concepts from Derrida (the contamination of supposed oppositions, language as alterity or non-presence, the ineradicable trace of otherness within the same), it is now possible to understand exactly why phenomenological efforts are depicted as always failing throughout the *Three Novels*, why those efforts are satirized rather than endorsed. The question of whether or not the narrators of all three novels are the same, whether Murphy turns into Moran turns into Molloy, etc., can now be summarily dispatched. Are the speakers the same? There is no same, only a mixture of sameness and difference, as indicated even by their names, which all begin with an *M* but are different thereafter. As Derrida began by focusing on the problem of origin in Husserl, how his binaries presuppose each other and therefore an origin can be ascribed to neither, so too does *Molloy* constantly highlight the problem of Molloy's origin. If the first part of the problem of phenomenological foreknowledge is that one can't bracket the world until one knows of the underlying production of phenomena by the subject, then Gaber's message solves that problem for Moran, even as it contaminates him. But what possible cause could be ascribed to Molloy himself? How could he bracket a world he was never in to begin with? Molloy presents himself as always already other, outside of typical existence, but then there can be no explanation for how his strange presence came to be found within that existence. This problem of Molloy's origin is highlighted in the opening three lines of the text: “I am in my mother's room. It's I who live here now. I don't know how I got here” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 3). Molloy immediately cannot explain how he came to be, and his mother, the source from which he came, is absent. His search for her throughout the rest of the story highlights the need for the possible explanation of origin she might bring, but her continued absence only highlights the lack of answers provided, and this lack of origin continues through *Malone Dies*, who also doesn't know how he came to possess his room, and *The Unnamable*, whose speaker assigns himself a beginning “only for the sake of clarity” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 289).

As for *Malone Dies*, it should be clear that the reason Malone cannot find any essential aspect of himself or Sapo/Macmann is that there is no such central aspect, since essence is impossible in language. The ending of *Malone Dies*, when Malone attempts to disappear into words, can now be understood via the conception of signs as infinitely iterable and yet never fully present, the usage of which requires the acceptance of death through the absence of the speaker. By achieving apotheosis and transforming himself into signs, Malone creates his own absence, but only by translating his presence into the partial form of language, so that his incomplete presence can still be reactivated by any reader of that language. As pure voice free of signs, Malone would be at once “both absolutely alive and absolutely dead,” (Derrida 88) but having translated that voice into language, he can be neither. Malone dies but doesn't die, pulled back from the grave each time his words are read.

In *The Unnamable*, in what I would describe as an instance of convergent evolution, with both recognizing the gap in Husserl's logic and adapting accordingly, Beckett demonstrates several affinities to Derrida, but I believe, in contrast to Beckett's frequent adoption by post-structuralists, that Beckett actually surpasses Derrida in his rejection of meaning. The main reason for the consistent application of Derrida to *The Unnamable*, why it is almost unavoidable, is that the Unnamable refers to himself not only as the pure now of an *I*, but also as the *you* of retention, with the self as a compound of those two, an *I/you* rather than pure *I*, and as I have shown this is Derrida's exact argument against pure self-presence in *Voice and Phenomenon*. To achieve that pure self-presence, the Unnamable would have to speak and hear himself simultaneously, to have interior language become transparent as described by Husserl. Instead, the impossibility of simultaneously sending and receiving words results in an “infinitesimal lag between arrival and departure” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 343) of the saying of *I*, so that no single “name ... no pronoun” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 393) is adequate to describe the speaker's identity. The self as grasped through language is always already other, which is why the pronouns used by the Unnamable to refer to himself shift between *I*, *you*, and even *he*, with none of these providing

any adequation between language and the speaker's self.

Richard Begam argues in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* that *The Unnamable* can be divided into thirds, with the first section dedicated to the presence of Mahood, the second section to the absence of Worm, and the aporetic welter of the final third as a “brilliant exercise in *differánc*” (175) in which the speaker moves in and between those two binaries, refusing to align himself with either. The speaker of *The Unnamable* has a “pensum to discharge,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 304) to achieve either total presence or absence through speaking, but I would argue that only the first third, the failure of the attempt to achieve total presence, truly aligns with Derrida. The Unnamable speaks in this section of another *M* character named Mahood, and this figure is linked with having a presence, a distinct individuality and personal history. The Unnamable initially claims that his task will be complete when he accepts the identity of Mahood, to admit “that [he] is someone” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 403) and achieve full presence, and the impossibility of that task in my opinion recapitulates Derrida's critique of Husserl, that if the particular can only be grasped through the general term, then that presence cannot ever be whole. However, I would argue that in the next two-thirds, Beckett surpasses Derrida by attempting to do away with relationality entirely. The next figure, Worm, begins as full absence rather than full presence, and then has identity impressed upon it from outside, with acts of perception creating the subject that intends them rather than the subject intending the act, as seen with Mahood and all previous characters.

By including Worm as the binary to Mahood, Beckett's critique of intentionality goes beyond Derrida. While Derrida continuously criticizes Western thought for overvaluing presence, he doesn't ultimately deny the existence of presence, with deconstruction meant more as an effort to balance the historical scales rather than placing any intrinsic value on absence. Beckett, on the other hand, is not trying to achieve a more accurate acknowledgement of the nature of relationality, he is trying to erase “the state of being in relation to” entirely. Derrida, despite his many critics, does not deny that meaning

is possible, but only believes it to be fluid, because particulars can never be fully expressed by the general or ideal terms of the noematic sense as constituted by language. Mahood shows that the particulars of his identity can't be grasped, but Worm takes the critique further to show that any absolute absence is always unreachable as well. Just as the general ruins the particular, so too does the particular ruin the general, and the task of the speaker in the final third shifts from the task of saying himself to the task of saying the nothingness that is himself, "to speak and yet say nothing," an attempt which always fails, "overlook[ing] something, a little yes, a little no" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 297). In *Voice and Phenomenon*, Derrida focuses only on the impossibility of pure presence, but Beckett displays the impossibility of both pure presence and pure absence, of reaching either a pure inside or outside, instead of accepting the mixture of the two as Derrida does.

Trapped in language and therefore lacking any absolute meaning, the Unnamable must inhabit a third term that is "neither inside nor outside, but a partition ... that belongs to neither" (Begam 177). Unable to achieve either task of becoming pure presence or pure absence in language/consciousness, the speaker declares that he must be neither inside nor outside, but "the thing that divides the world in two ... the partition ... the tympanum" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 376). Since the Unnamable can only be "this dust of words, with no ground for their settling," (Beckett, *Three Novels* 379) he must never arrive anywhere, because language never arrives anywhere, the signified always delayed, so that he can only "go on squirming for ever at the end of the line" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 332). Derrida denies the possibility of complete affirmation, but not meaning as a whole. The final problem of *The Unnamable* is not just the denial of affirmation, but the impossible goal of denying denial itself. This act of total denial, remaining inside it rather than being exterior to it, is impossible for two reasons. First, if consciousness is intentionality, it is always in relation to, and therefore to be conscious of its denial is to be in relation to it. Second, absolute denial is impossible in language, since one must reference what one denies in order to negate it. This necessity of calling forth that which one means to deny means that

there is always a remaining trace that can never be fully erased, since each effort at erasure only adds to the mess, pushes the Unnamable further away from “the peace where he neither is, nor is not, and where the language dies that permits of such expressions” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 328). The x in $-(x)$ might be negated or delayed, but the trace of its presence always remains. The unstated answer to the opening question of “Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares?” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 285) is “No,” and since one can't do something without being aware of it, one cannot ever truly be ephectic, to lack knowledge of their lack of knowledge. As soon as that lack of knowledge is recognized, it is destroyed. When the Unnamable tries to reach absence through language, he must as a result always conjure that which he means to deny, or, to put it most simply, become trapped in the conundrum that “the Unnamable” is itself still a name.

V. Forensics, Brief Conclusion

The essential is never to arrive anywhere, never to be anywhere. – Samuel
Beckett, *Malone Dies*

To conclude, I'd like to demonstrate how the form of each novel demonstrates the philosophical framework I've applied to it, then address a few possible objections to my argument. In arguing that philosophy has determined the structure of these five novels, I would hope it would by now be clear that I am not arguing that Beckett is adopting those philosophical positions, as he has none. Beckett's impossible method of failure, similar to Democritus, is that of inhabiting not to endorse but to expose, attempting to be *in* but not *of*. However, one must still understand the reference point in order to understand the parody, which means that one must also recognize the parallels I have enumerated or am about to enumerate in order to fully understand the satire. Since I have already glossed over the thematic parallels of Beckett's early fiction to philosophy, the structural parallels, due to Beckett's merging of form and content, should be apparent without more philosophical explication.

As I've shown, *Murphy* is 13 chapters, and those chapters recapitulate the Cartesian mind/body

divide by alternating between Murphy or mind-centric chapters and Celia or world-centric chapters. The novel itself is divided between the body and the mind through its structure. *Watt* consists of four sections, indicating some logical separation of parts, a coherent system.¹⁵ However, the chaos of the addenda shows that this seeming logicity is nothing but a lie, with the structure of *Watt* then displaying the inadequacy of its own organizational system. *Molloy* is in two parts because the *epochē* and phenomenological reduction problematically require two separate but simultaneous actions, and *Molloy* highlights the problematic nature of that simultaneity by having the Molloy section precede the Moran section when any linear chronology would place Moran at the start, as Moran is clearly closer to our world at the beginning of his story, and with this intentional disruption of the expected chronology only highlighting the problematic origin of the characters. Neither *Malone Dies* nor *The Unnamable* is divided into parts, and that is because once existence has been bracketed, all experience is recognized as a production of the voice and is therefore undifferentiated, can no longer be distinguished into separate entities. While the sentences and paragraphs are relatively short and orderly in *Murphy*, *Watt* and *Molloy*, and the movement between Malone and Sapo provides the paragraphs of *Malone Dies* with the limits necessary to retain a similarly coherent form, the reduction to the all-encompassing medium of voice in *The Unnamable* means that its paragraphs and sentences lose all shape, extending beyond the ability of these meaning-giving units to give form to the voice that flows through them. In *The Unnamable*, the chaos takes over the form itself, and the extreme length of the sentences and paragraphs means that they lose any absolute meaning, can no longer be grasped in their entirety, just as the Unnamable cannot say itself in a single phrase.

The vocabulary of each novel also parallels the different philosophies they parody, employing each philosophy's unique conception of meaning only to show the flaws of each system. For Descartes,

¹⁵ The obvious symbolic move here would be to link each of the four parts to the 4 steps in Descartes' method. However, there is not enough difference between sections to provide evidence for such an argument in my opinion, since all of the Descartes' steps occur in all of *Watt's* parts, and can't be uniquely tied to any of them.

meaning is essential, self-evident free from all context, and functions through a one-to-one correspondence. This is shown in *Murphy's* absurdly specialized vocabulary and heightened diction, which I believe to be its most distinctive linguistic feature. *Murphy* is always searching for the hapax legomenon, the word that perfectly expresses the singular nature of each instance, such as Neary's description of Murphy as "that long hank of Apollonian asthenia ... that schizoidal spasmophile," (31) amongst countless examples. Such language comically demonstrates that to so obscurely express the particular is to sacrifice the reference to the general by which communication takes place, making the whole effort self-defeating. In Wittgenstein, language must be broken down to "simples," and *Watt* reflects this by employing the opposite tactic as *Murphy* and focusing on lists of basic, one-syllable names of simple objects, such as how "sat," "knelt," "bed," "fire," and "door" were used in reference to the movements of Mr. Knott in the excerpt quoted in the *Watt* section of this argument, but these lists lose all complexity by focusing only on such simple elements, pinning down inessentials while the subject escapes entirely. In Husserlian phenomenology, language gains incomplete meaning through use in indication, but has no meaning whatsoever in interior expression because it becomes transparent. Once that interior is contaminated with the exterior, as it is in Beckett and Derrida, then repetition is the only vehicle by which to attach meaning to a word, but each application of that general term to a new particular changes that meaning by increasing it. The failure of repetition to provide a stable basis for linguistic meaning is demonstrated at the end of *The Unnamable*, when a few specific words are increasingly repeated, but only to show their inability to capture that which they are meant to represent. As shown in the figures below, in which *Molloy* spans from roughly 1-3.5, *Malone Dies* from 3.5 to 7.5, and *The Unnamable* from 7.5-10, with the final third from 9-10, the more the Unnamable wants to not say words so that he can not know anything and become silence, the more he must participate in that which he means to deny, pushing further away that which he desires most.

Fig. 1 “Say”

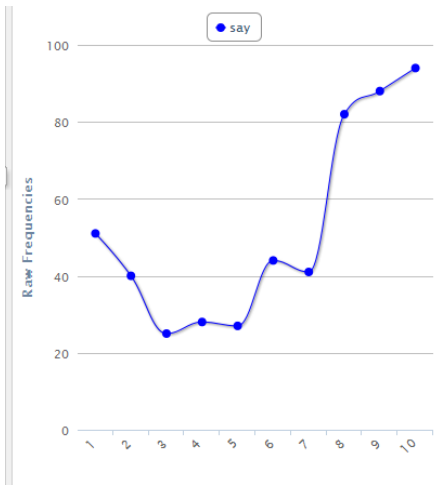


Fig. 2 “Know”

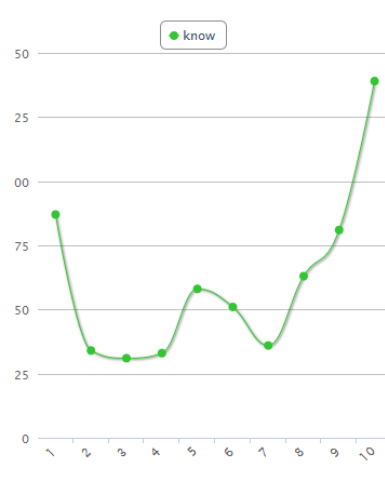
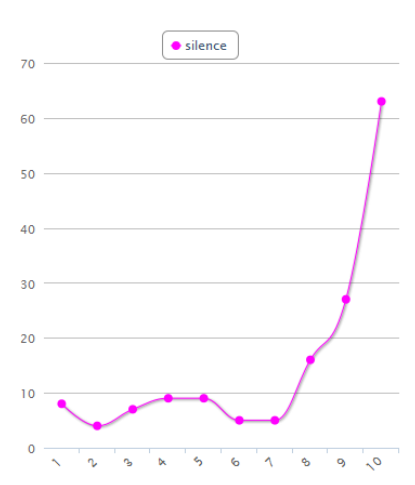


Fig. 3 “Silence”



As demonstrated by these figures, the word “say” doubles in usage (from an average rate of 50 uses per decile to a rate of 98) as the speaker tries to not say anything, and when the speaker wants to not know anything, the word “know” increases from a low point in *Malone Dies* of 36 uses per decile to a rate of 140 uses per decile. “Silence,” which I would argue is “the keyword to the whole business,” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 362) skyrockets from a rate of roughly 10 uses per decile to a rate of 60 uses per decile. “Silence” best embodies the conundrum of repetition as meaning, how it pushes its object away with each attempt at grasping, because the saying of “silence” can itself never be silent. The vehicle of delivery, language, automatically makes unavailable the arrival of the desired object, a word for “silence” that incarnates silence itself.

If the meaning of the word “silence” stems from accumulation of use rather than essence or logic, then each time the Unnamable says “silence,” the meaning of “silence” increases, and the more often the Unnamable says “silence,” the faster the rate of change. In the first utterance of “silence,” the Unnamable uses it to refer in the typical fashion to “silence” as the absence of sound, saying that “though the silence here is almost unbroken, it is not completely so” (Beckett, *Three Novels* 289). As

the Unnamable's monologue proceeds, however, the meaning of "silence" changes to represent not only the lack of sound but also the lack of being, since being as language is an aural phenomenon. Unable to reach either the pure presence of sound or the pure absence of sound, to determine whether he is "words among words or silence in the midst of silence," (Beckett, *Three Novels* 382) the Unnamable keeps repeating the word "silence" in an attempt to invoke its nothingness, but that increased repetition only pushes his goal further away, and "the real silence" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 401) can never be said, its nothingness never reached. Since the Unnamable is "made of silence" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 406) but bears the task of "say[ing] words until they find [him], until they say [him]," (Beckett, *Three Novels* 407) that task can never end, because the Unnamable can never succeed in his goal.

Reminiscent of Derrida's notion of *différance*, the possibility of "silence" as signifying non-being is only made possible because language is an unstable medium, since that change in signification requires the change of "silence" from initially indicating a lack of sound to "silence" as indicating a lack of presence, but the very malleability that makes it possible for "silence" to change from representing a lack of sound to representing a lack of being also makes it impossible for the meaning of "silence" to remain stable enough to reach the desired state of total representation. Instead of ending with the incarnation of presence or absence, the Unnamable's reliance upon language means that he automatically fails, since language cannot incarnate absolutes, and as a result his speech will always keep going "on."

Or does it? Most readings of the famous final lines of *The Unnamable*, "You can't go on. I must go on. I'll go on," view this as an endlessly repeating final point. The repetition of this last formula could be thought of in mathematical terms, (you can't go on X I must go on X I'll go on) $\diamond\infty$, with the reduction to logical form insuring the stability of meaning, but only via the total erasure of the particular. Alternatively, to avoid erasing the particular, one could also conceive of this formula as actually repeating without end: "You can't go on, I must go on, I'll go on; You can't go on, I must go on,

I'll go on ... *ad infinitum*." This would preserve each individual word, but the infinite repetition would eventually detach all logical meaning from their usage, leaving only the mantra of the senseless particulars.

However, I believe that it's possible to use the *meta* to arrive at a different reading of this ending formula, one that also allows for a final statement on Beckett's relationship to philosophy as a whole. Although I have ignored any discussion of the *meta* up to this point, in many critical readings¹⁶, the *I* of *The Unnamable* is eventually read as Beckett's own, describing himself sitting in a room writing the story of him writing that story, only to display the limits of storytelling. I have previously left out this *meta* level of Beckett's fiction as this reading does little to disturb my interpretation, since I would counter that adding in Beckett as another speaker only serves to further highlight that the all-encompassing medium of the voice consumes any particularity it expresses. If there is no sameness to identity, then the possible presence of "Samuel Beckett" in *The Unnamable* is only the final example that nothing escapes the generalizing contamination of the voice, because "Samuel Beckett" is as much of a fiction as Molloy and all the rest. However, rather than reading "You can't go on. I must go on. I'll go on," as an unending repetition, either logical or literal, I'd argue that an appeal to the *meta* allows one to recognize the very real fact that *The Unnamable* does indeed end, as all novels end, in the white space of the page that follows the final punctuation mark. Despite all of the speakers' efforts, all their "college quips" (Beckett, *Three Novels* 342) about being and existence, the silence of that white page waits for them (and us) at the end, and every word they utter is a mere diversion from that unsayable inevitability. The greatest irony of "You can't go on. I must go on. I'll go on," might just be the rather uncomplicated fact that it is at precisely this point that the novel ends, so that the decision is erased as soon as it's made.

Why does that irony matter? I believe that this juxtaposition of a voice claiming it must go on

16 Kenner, for example, in the chapter "The Man in the Room" in *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*

just as it finally is silenced serves to highlight the powerlessness of the voice itself, and shows how Beckett is satirizing the possibilities soon to be offered by post-structuralism as much as he satirized Descartes and phenomenology. The mistake of post-structuralists is to think that since what I have argued is Beckett's satire of phenomenology resembles post-structural critiques of Husserl, Beckett's own stance resembles a type of proto-post-structuralism. I would argue, however, that Beckett satirizes the future position of post-structuralism as much as he does Descartes and phenomenology, as shown by the devastating erasure of voice enacted by the white space of the end of *The Unnamable*. The imposition of the void upon the Unnamable's monologue renders all of its components meaningless, including the post-structural realization that he is "made of words." As with the rest of philosophy, this realization of the Unnamable's dependency upon language to compose himself is shown to be useless, since it does nothing to either dispel or hasten the oncoming void, which proceeds unscathed by all attempts to influence it through language. Instead of offering some final truth that explains Beckett, the post-structural highlighting of Beckett's portrayals of the instability of language is only another tactic of "loathsome combat" like all the rest. Beckett's renunciation was so total that he was able to renounce not only the philosophy of the past and present, but also the philosophy of the near future.

Derrida, perhaps recognizing that Beckett is always satirizing rather than endorsing, refused to offer any statement on Beckett and thereby avoids the mistakes of those like Trezise and Katz who claim Beckett as one of their own, but in doing so Derrida provides absolutely nothing of value by way of approaching Beckett. As a final way of understanding Beckett's early fiction as a whole, and without resorting to claiming Beckett as a philosopher, as most critics do, while still at least saying something, as Derrida fails to do, I would argue that the only ultimate judgment delivered on philosophy as expressed throughout these five novels, but particularly at the end of *The Unnamable*, is that philosophy merely provides us with something amusing to say as the white space of nullity approaches to do away with all of our efforts to say it. I recognize that this is not the most complicated statement,

and as I said at the introduction, the tendency to complicate is normally one of literary criticism's greatest strengths, but Beckett turns that strength into a weakness, dares the critic to remove the intricacies of their armor and stand defenseless before the void.

The white space at the end of *The Unnamable* could be seen as the fulfillment of the Unnamable's impossible goal to say “silence” itself, but it can only be seen and not said, because language is always contaminated by the very relationality from which Beckett seeks to escape. If *The Unnamable*'s monologue ends with the leap to the transcendent level of the visual, then that transcendence requires total erasure to reach the blankness which is the incarnation of silence itself. The only language that can represent the nothingness Beckett seeks is the visible absence of language, and, in a final paradox and joke, the white space at the end of *The Unnamable* leaves us with the last revelation that the fullest embodiment of Beckett's writing, the only writing that can meet his impossible demands, is no writing at all.

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